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SKETCH OF A SINNER

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

A BROOD OF DUCKLINGS
SUMMER STORM
THE ELDER SISTER
YOUNG FELIX
THE THREE LOVERS
COQUETTE
SEPTEMBER
SHOPS AND HOUSES
NOCTURNE
THE CHASTE WIFE
ON THE STAIRCASE
THE HAPPY FAMILY
THE CASEMENT
THE YOUNG IDEA
THE MERRY HEART

A LONDON BOOKMAN
TOKEFIELD PAPERS

R. L. STEVENSON: A CRITICAL STUDY
GEORGE GISSING: A CRITICAL STUDY

SKETCH OF A SINNER

BY FRANK SWINNERTON

DOUBLEDAY, DORAN

AND COMPANY, INC.

GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

1929

PR6037
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1929

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES AT
THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS
GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

FIRST EDITION

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PART ONE

THE THREE MEN

NORTHFIELD, MINN.

CHAPTER ONE: SEBASTIAN AND THE STRANGER

29812

I

From the window of her bedroom, which was immediately over the shop, Lydia could see the busy roadway below, where chocolate-coloured tramcars and red omnibuses thundered by and where the little figures of men and women often kept her absorbed for an hour together. There was something amusing and pathetic in the way these human creatures trotted along the pavements, and met others who were like themselves, and stood talking without making any sound, as if they were no more than shadows formed by a conjuror's finger and thumb. They did not know that Lydia could see them. She sometimes wondered if she herself, who felt so full of life, looked like one of these stout women with bags and baskets of shopping, who waited opposite for the big trams—tired and heavy, closing their eyes, turning, changing their loads from one hand to another. They seemed so dumb, so faithfully dumb, like drowsy horses; and Lydia, watching and smiling, felt extraordinarily far from being dumb. She felt that if she were to be as these women were she would not want to go on living. And yet, being so different, how could she know what it would be like to feel crushed and stupid and hopeless? Sometimes, as she turned away from the window, Lydia drew a deep breath, and slowly allowed it to escape. As she did so, her eyes would partly close, and she would remember, it seemed, a thousand different happenings and sensations. Most of them belonged to her married life, because this room in which she now stood was crowded with memories; but at times she went farther back, to childhood, to all sorts of sweet and bitter doings, all of them a part of herself and the twenty-seven years during which she had been alive.

Upon this Spring day, the sunshine was making the road and the shops opposite look very stale and dowdy. It seemed

to filter through the clouds in a sort of mauve radiance, and it became at last oppressive to the spirit. Lydia slowly backed from the window, from which she had been regarding a shabby old man, a Jew, who was pestering the dawdlers with cards bearing, apparently, his name and address, as a dealer in old clothes. She was smiling, and as she smiled she raised her head with unconscious pride. Standing thus, with her face turned towards the shaded window, she looked very tall. Her shoulders were firm, and the line of her back was strong and graceful. Her hands, hanging easily at her sides, were large, well-shaped, and capable. There was everything in her carriage except buoyancy. In her face there was everything except beauty. She had clear grey eyes, thoughtful and derisive; she had a rather long face, of almost milky pallor, very light brown hair and darker brown eyebrows with a reddish tinge, a nose which was too broad at the base, a large and expressive mouth. Her height, the vigour of her body, and her blanched face were what instantly drew the attention. Afterwards, one noticed the slight irony in those thoughtful eyes, and realised that it was this shrewd, tender, and destructive humour which gave to Lydia both interest and character. She was an original; not a copy.

The room was large and lofty. The walls, although weather-faded, retained something of the cheerfulness formerly given to them by a florid and brightly-coloured paper. The furniture was modern and plain. An armchair of no distinction, with a cretonne cover in red and green and white, stood by the fireplace; by the white lace-curtained window, shaded by Venetian blinds, was a large oaken dressing-table with a winged mirror. To-day, as the breeze blew, the curtains were floating up and sweeping over the corner of the dressing-table, and sometimes were catching one wing of the mirror, and remaining suspended by it. Between window and fire was a tall wardrobe, also of oak, and the door of the wardrobe

formed another mirror, in which Lydia at need could see herself at full length. The floor was linoleum-covered in green, and bright crimson woollen rugs stood before the fire and the dressing-table and beside each of the two small beds with crimson counterpanes. Hanging above, rather frowningly, were some large steel-engravings, representing young ladies accompanied by lugubrious dogs and lovers; while, interspersed with these, as if by some tempered impatience upon Lydia's part, were one or two coloured reproductions of famous Italian pictures, including Botticelli's "Venus Rising from the Sea" and Bramantino's "Putto under a Vine." It was a comfortable room, and the marble mantelpiece was beautiful; but it was not a room which showed very fastidious taste or any ardent love for the more exquisite of those objects in which Sebastian Rowe dealt as a matter of business. Nobody, in fact, could have supposed from this room the nature of Sebastian's employment; nobody, amid the turbulence of oddity below, could have imagined the existence of so calm and so bare a haven upon the first floor, immediately above the shop.

Had that old Jew clothes dealer passed? Against her will, Lydia returned to the window, and peeped from it without disturbing the curtain. Yes, he had gone. His ingratiating smile, the waving of his hands, his air of interested geniality, all of which signs had created a feeling of aversion in Lydia, had disappeared. They still seemed to hang in the air, as if they might mysteriously reappear; but the dull crowd trudged and wandered along, showing no trace of recent amusement. Once more Lydia observed them, without impatience, but wonderingly. Then, this time showing resolution, she turned from the window, crossed the room, and made her way out on to the bare boards of the landing.

Immediately she was engulfed in the litter of Sebastian's store. Every variety of pot, chair, dish, and table was stacked in apparent disorder about the landing. Old pictures, old pew-

ter, a sideboard of old oak, a footstool, a warming pan, and innumerable fire-irons in steel, brass, and copper, met her eye. The stairs were grimy; the balustrade was sticky with London dust; the scent of wood and the musty smell of antique dirt made her nostrils smart. Grimacing, carrying herself erect and, as it were, physically compressed, she made her way down between the assembled treasures. No contrast could have been greater than that between this litter and the slim, strong figure in its plain brown dress.

At the foot of the stairs Lydia paused.

"Are you there, dear?" she asked, evenly. Then, hardly raising her voice: "Sebastian!"

A low sound was the only response. In his strange lair at the back of the shop, behind a protection formed of book-shelves over which a Persian rug was draped, Sebastian was sitting, closely examining a book. He poked out his head at Lydia's call, and she smiled. It was a smile that deepened as she gazed; for that odd figure, the inquiring glance, which was half abstracted, the dirty hands, and the astonishing air of innocence belonging by nature to Sebastian, never failed to move Lydia to amusement and pity.

"Old stick!" she murmured to herself. Aloud, she said: "I'm going to get the tea, now. It's late."

"Oh, yes," answered Sebastian, vaguely; and sat back again in his old wooden chair, taking delight in the book he held. But Lydia knew that he was not reading the book. Sebastian never read books. He was examining it carefully, to make sure that it was a perfect copy; and when he had seen that it was perfect he would know the value to set upon the book and the person among his clients who would be most likely to buy it. Lydia, in this household, was the only one who read books.

Without further word, Lydia turned a squeaking handle, opened a door under the stairs, stepped into the darkness, and, drawing the door fast behind her, with another squeak of the

handle, was lost to Sebastian's sight. She was going down to the only other part of the premises which was not a museum. Here also, in her kitchen and in the semi-basement sitting-room under the shop, there was an absence of dirt, a plainness and a comfort, which belonged to Lydia and not to her husband. In the half-light of the kitchen she was like a ghost, moving mysteriously to and fro, between the cupboard and the dresser and the table, until at last the cloth was laid and a light set to the gas jet above. Then it could be seen that in this house tea was still a meal. There was bread and butter, cut in thin slices; and there was jam to spread upon the bread and butter. There was a large currant cake; and there were many small cakes, tarts, and scones, such as would have delighted the hearts of all the little boys in Kentish Town. At last:

"Tea!" called Lydia. "Tea! And wash your hands!" To herself, in a murmur, she added: "Because otherwise the germs'll——"

She did not say what the germs would do, because she did not know. Perhaps "bite you." Nor did she begin to pour out the tea; because she realised that she might have to call Sebastian three or four times before he grasped the fact that tea was ready. With one eye upon the clock standing high up above the fire, on a blackened kitchen mantelpiece, she waited. Every now and again somebody walked across the grating in the pavement, his heels making a grunting sound upon the iron bars; and as these noises struck her ears shadows were thrown down through the kitchen window. But no more could be seen when the shadows passed.

"Tea!" Lydia's voice, strong and clear, rose echoingly up the stair. "Tea! Come along! And *wash your hands!*"

Silence. Presently the sound of a chair being ground hard back as its occupant rose. A stamping overhead. The handle of the door under the stairs squeaked; scuffling noises, such as those ordinarily made by slippers, were heard. Thump, thump,

thump. Sebastian's heels upon the oilcloth. Lydia heard the running of a tap, the sound of vigorous lathering and sluicing. Not only hands were being washed, but a face, perhaps a head of soft, feathery hair. Good-natured, good-tempered, and obedient as ever, Sebastian was performing customary rites before venturing to eat in company with his wife. It was a lesson he had learned since their marriage, five years earlier. One of the lessons he had learned. Softly, Lydia laughed to herself—softly and lovingly.

There came other sounds, of panting and towelling, before Sebastian finally appeared; and then she saw his reddened face, his sparse, wandering hair, and the lustreless eyes behind those round black-rimmed spectacles. Sebastian, still breathing rapidly from his late exercise, and smoothing his grey moustache, came stooping into the kitchen. He was smiling vaguely, yet with his own pleasant cunning. As the red faded from his cheeks, and they resumed their normal pallor, Lydia was swept with the slight discomfort which sight of that yellowness always gave her. It made Sebastian look, with the straggling grey moustache, rather like a Chinaman. For Sebastian's innocent expression was as baffling to Lydia now as it had always been. What lay behind? She did not know. What was it he saw, and did not say? The discomfort was gone in an instant; but it had been there.

"Put you tie straight," commanded Lydia. "Come along!"

A mother could not have been more stern. But always, behind the sternness, there was protective love.

"Hm." Sebastian made a little murmuring sound, suffered her to set his tie to rights, and sat down in his place. Contentedly, he surveyed the table. It did not seem necessary to him to speak. His feelings could always be expressed by that soft, sighing grunt. "Hm."

"Well, what are *you* 'hm'-ing about?" asked Lydia, cheerfully. "Seems as if you was pleased with yourself."

Sebastian looked at her softly across the table.

"Yes," he said, in a lingering tone. "I was thinking." He smiled to himself.

"You do have a time, don't you!" rallied Lydia. "Thinking. Thrilling, it is!"

"Thrilling? For you? Well, I suppose it *is* rather boring," agreed Sebastian, calmly. He did not seem to be at all contrite.

"I never said so. I didn't mean it, either," rebuked Lydia. "What's for you to-day?" She moved her hand inclusively above the offerings.

"Hm," murmured Sebastian, pensively. He looked like a chess-champion, meditating the sacrifice of a pawn. "Yes, I was thinking. You don't want to know what I was thinking, I suppose?"

"It wouldn't help me," retorted Lydia.

"No; I suppose it wouldn't. I was thinking that on this day six years ago you and I first met."

Lydia jumped. "Fancy his remembering that!" she thought. She herself had forgotten it.

"Well, so it is," she said, at last. "Seems less than that."

"Less or longer?"

"Both."

There was a pause, while Lydia's mind flashed back six years. She compared memory with the Sebastian who was before her. He had aged. That much she knew. Six years had thinned his hair. His quickness was less. There was something more than that, too. He still loved her, but he was used to her. She didn't like the way his eyes had lost colour and brightness, or the way he sometimes breathed, or the redness that faded so quickly. After fifty, unless a man has constant exercise, he ages physically in proportion to his natural vigour. Sebastian was no exception to that law. Lydia knew it, disliked it, struggled with it. In vain. Memory of what he had been was alert, defensive, and merciless; and even at the height of merci-

lessness was shot through with a kind of detached pity.

"Six happy years," remarked Sebastian, as if to himself.

The words came from him so sweetly that Lydia, quite startled, melted. Still seeming unmoved, she was in fact soft and kind in all her thoughts of him. To hide her gratitude, she became rather severe.

"Old stick!" she murmured. "And yet in a minute you'll be grumbling because your tea's cold."

"Do I grumble?" asked Sebastian, mildly. "How strange. Do I? I didn't know I grumbled. I always think of myself as so patient."

Lydia nodded.

"I've noticed," she agreed. "All men do. You think you're so good and thoughtful and self-sacrificing and patient——"

"Aren't I?" asked Sebastian, looking delightfully astonished. Was he in earnest? Lydia never could tell. Like other ironists, she was always perplexed by the possible irony of others.

"In a way, yes. Not the way you think. What about me?"

"Oh, of course, you're perfection," gravely responded Sebastian. "I think we make a very good pair. I mean, you with your——" He did not finish what he had been going to say; but took a buttered scone, and spread jam thickly upon it. His next words were spoken from a full mouth. "It's a strange world, isn't it!" he remarked. "Not that I think it becomes less strange by saying so, but——" The scone was swallowed. Apologetically, he explained: "I was thinking of the Vanstones, and all *that*——"

"Well, you don't need to go further than yourself," observed Lydia. "If you're talking about *strange* things."

"Hm," said Sebastian. He drank from his teacup, and set the cup down. "You're not at all strange, yourself. I shouldn't think there was ever anybody less strange than you in the whole history of the world." Although he spoke gravely, he

smiled gently—as if at some secret amusement of his own.

"I'm *very* strange," retorted Lydia. "But don't you see—if *one* of us is strange, the other's got to be not so strange. If the man's strange, the woman's got to be sensible; and if the woman's strange——"

"Marvellous!" breathed Sebastian.

"She's mad; and there's an end of it," concluded Lydia. "Poor thing!"

Sebastian took his refilled teacup from her hand.

"You say *if* a man is mad his wife *must* be sane; and if the husband is sane——"

"Well *is* he?" asked Lydia, appealingly. "I was meaning that you being an old dreamy-head I can't let myself go to sleep. If you were a sheik, I should be different."

"Nonsense!" cried Sebastian. "You're not putty! All this rubbish——" He pushed away his teacup. "It's ridiculous. Besides, what use would a sheik be to you? You'd laugh at him."

"I suppose I should," mused Lydia. "But then, I laugh at *you*."

"Yes, I wonder I let you." He rose from the table—a thin figure, with bent shoulders, and that whimsical, smiling face. "So far from your being subordinate, as you pretend—though, God knows, it's a pretty nearly universal pretence with all women—the fact is that by being so good-natured I encourage you to be cheeky. It's extraordinary!" And by the time Sebastian had reached the word "extraordinary," his voice had become as squeaky as the handle of the door at the top of the stairs.

"Oh, it's me that's to blame, of course," groaned Lydia.

"Who else?" he murmured, touching her cheek lightly with his hand in passing.

She heard him go with a heavy tread back to the shop. She heard the door-handle squeak, and resolved to oil it. She re-

membered the Vanstones, keepers of a boarding-house where she had been something between a servant and a guest, nursemaid to the younger children, sewing-maid, assistant cook. She now remembered as clearly as he had done their first meeting, and Sebastian's first speech to her. It had been an odd speech, and there had been a row afterwards, because Mrs. Vanstone had been so indignant with Lydia for letting Sebastian—as she thought—mistake her for one of the family. Within a year they had been married.

Recalling that meeting, and her quick pleasure at his approach, her excitement, the mortification that followed, and the final triumph, Lydia jumped up from the table, giving the tea-tray a slight jerk which made all the china rattle. Mrs. Vanstone had never forgiven her. She had thought Lydia sly. Uncharitable, white-faced old cat! Lydia could still feel the chill which those pale gooseberry eyes, one of them slightly poached, sent through her. "I want to speak to you, Lydia. For your own good——" Yes, that was a day! She was older now. Exactly six years older.

"Twenty-seven," said she, gravely enough. "Soon be twenty-eight. Getting a big girl now."

Standing thus in the half-lighted kitchen, into which the dusk was already bringing darkness, Lydia seemed to be listening. In reality, she was thinking deeply and incoherently. But she did not remain still for very long, and at last, laughing, she grew very busy, and began to gather the pieces of china together and pile them on to the tray. No good mooning; no good grizzling; no good allowing the time to go by! How late it was getting! Nearly dark!

"*You're* a bright spark!" murmured Lydia, addressing herself very callously. "Come on, come on," she hustled herself. "It's enough to give anybody the creeps, the way you hang about!"

Along the pavement she still heard the thump of dull foot-

steps; heels still scrambled across the grating above the window. Shadows were darker. Soon, as the arc lights in the street fizzed into life, they would become ghostly. Lydia could picture the sky, a pale grey; and the light of a Spring evening, so tender, so cruel to the heart, so entrancing. Six years ago. Six! It might have been a month—or a century. Brrrh! It was getting too dusky to see! And the dishes to wash. Yes, six years was a long time. It was so long ago that she could not be sure of anything at all about it. So long ago, and not long enough ago to be sharpened by reviving imagination. She must ask Sebastian if he wanted to have supper at home. Supper at home, or—— The vision of a bright restaurant delighted her. She imagined the dresses and the noises, the unfamiliar foodstuffs, the waiters——

"Fancy that old stick remembering!" Lydia murmured to herself. Animation had come into her face. She was smiling broadly. "It's just like him; and yet——" What went on in his head? What *went on* in his head? That was what Lydia could never make out.

II

Mrs. Way, the widow who lived upon the top floor, above Sebastian's uppermost stage of litter, was glad to make a little extra money by helping Lydia with the cleaning, and by minding the place while they were out. She had known Sebastian for years; and long before Lydia had been married Mrs. Way was already safely housed—a fixture—in those two little upper rooms. They were hot rooms in the Summer, and were bitterly cold in Winter. But they suited Mrs. Way, and it suited the Rowes to have somebody in the house who would put her door open and listen for any unusual sounds below. What she would have done if the sounds had risen was not clear, since her only exit from the building was down the stairs and through the shop; but the sense of security was all that mat-

tered, and no doubt ever arose regarding the unspecified emergency. In a sense, Lydia did not "know" Mrs. Way; but she was quite confident of her honesty, and Mrs. Way was one of those small, tough women who are as brave as terriers. She would have found some means of circumventing any robber in the world; and, after all, Sebastian's premises were crowded either with immovable articles or with articles of little value. His more profitable activities lay outside his shop, or were only so far in it as to lodge roughly for a day or a week before they were hastened off to some other destination.

And so, before dressing, Lydia ran part of the distance upstairs to warn Mrs. Way that they were going out for the evening. She called: she did not go quite as far as the door of Mrs. Way's sitting-room. Thus she avoided a long talk with Mrs. Way, who was always ready for interminable conversation; and she was back again in her own bedroom, and at the big wardrobe, within five minutes of the staircase journey. Lydia whistled as she looked into the wardrobe. And in the middle of the tune she broke off her whistle, and laughed, because when Sebastian heard her whistling he always smiled drily. He tried not to smile in case her feelings should be hurt; but he always yielded in the end, and Lydia, watching, smiled also, and the whistle was lost. Idiot! If Sebastian had been a little less funny, he would have been in the West End, as powerful as the big men. Was that true? Lydia was sure of it. Her faith in Sebastian was perfect. In all their six years together he had done nothing to disillusion her. She might laugh and tease, but the core of respect, of admiration for his character, was untouched. And yet something in him, something in his failure, wounded her at times almost beyond endurance. If only he had been a little less funny!

Her green dress would have to do for to-night. It had lost its first freshness; but it was the best she had. There was no chance that they would be going to a restaurant where really

smart women would eye her. Even if they did, what would it matter? She didn't care what anybody said or thought about her. Didn't she? Lydia was defiant in thought: in her heart she shrank as weakly as any other woman from that appraising, destructive stare. Quickly she changed her dress, and stood for a moment, turning this way and that, before the morror. Then she laid upon his bed a suit of Sebastian's, a clean shirt, a collar, a tie, a handkerchief; and going out upon the crowded landing she called him.

This was her life, it seemed. She was always calling him, and receiving no answer; calling again, and being won by his charm. At that final hail from below she smiled, and teasingly, ironically, urged him to greater speed. "Come on, slow-coach! Dormouse! Tortoise!" Otherwise, how would she ever persuade him to do anything at all?

"Worse than a child!" she murmured. "Far worse. Sebastian!"

"Coming!" The bare boards were stamped; he ran quickly up the stairs, panting.

"You oughtn't to run!" Lydia said, frowning anxiously. "It makes you wheeze."

She left him full of promising activity, and went down to the kitchen. It was half an hour before Sebastian joined her, and by this time some of the excitement had faded. They were both once again practical, locking and shaking the shutter at the front door, and glancing about them as a few people strolled by. The streets at this hour were not crowded; but the lighted trams and omnibuses roared past.

"What a rhythm these things have," Sebastian ruminated. "The monsters!"

Lydia made no reply. They walked soberly to the corner at which the omnibuses stopped, and looked up at the pale sky. A moon in its first quarter seemed very high above, and as they glanced down again to the earth Lydia's ears sang, as if she

had been listening at the mouth of a shell. Presently a bus swayed alongside; Lydia, fixedly observing from the upper deck all they passed, was lost in a dream. She became God-like, detached, irresponsible, enchanted, until the journey's end.

This evening was to be a series of wonders, for Sebastian took her arm and tucked it within his own, as he had been used to do before they were married. How like him! Protective, even where he could not protect her! Supposing any danger had really threatened? The thought made Lydia want to laugh. Gaiety seized her, and she mischievously pinched the soft muscle of his arm. The strange old silly! As if she hadn't, long ago, found out that he was no protection! As if he didn't need looking after all the time! But it pleased Sebastian to think that he was taking charge. It pleased him to think—oh, all sorts of things about her. Nobody knew what went on in his head, least of all Sebastian! And while she laughed she knew that Sebastian, being a trifle shorter than herself, would probably be glancing up under the brim of her hat, as he could do, and catching the laugh, and laughing secretly at things that Lydia would never fathom.

It was evidently for Soho that they were bound, to a rough little Italian restaurant where the food was good. Lydia would have preferred a gayer place; but she gave no sign of disappointment. She only stepped close beside Sebastian under the blazing lights, which made everybody look at the point of death. It was blinding to move out of the light into the comparative darkness of Soho Square. As they approached the restaurant, Lydia shuddered at a preception that the windows were steamy, and the lace curtains were quite limp with moist heat; but once they were within, and had found a cramped table upon the first floor, she forgot the steam and the curtains. She saw and heard with amusement the dark moustachioed men, Italians and loud-voiced, who sat at a long table near

them, and smiled when they boisterously laughed; for the room was no bigger than an ordinary room, and everybody was pressed inconveniently close together. The group at the long table was all out of focus. In noise and movement, it exceeded Lydia's powers of sight and hearing. She could do nothing but stare, deafened.

As she did this, she became conscious that she herself was under scrutiny, and, characteristically, she looked straight in the direction from which she supposed the distraction to be coming. There in the corner, sitting by himself, was a man. He was not a particularly young man, but neither was he middle-aged. Lydia thought him perhaps a dozen years younger than Sebastian. His eyes, cool and sombre, were fixed upon Lydia's face, drawn thither, she must suppose, by the liveliness of her interest in the laughing Italians. He was unsmiling, olive-skinned, his head rather high above the table, as if he were tall; and Lydia, in that one swift glance, noticed a curiously shaped forehead, which seemed to swell above narrow temples. His hair was black; black straight brows gave severity to his face; his nose was thin and long, and slightly overhung a small black moustache; while the lips below that trim moustache were very thin, and were pressed closely together. As Lydia looked at him this man made no attempt to avert his eyes; neither did he smile or so emphasise his glance as to suggest a stare. He was interested. He was watching. But he was doing this, if he was doing it consciously at all, with no apparent desire to embarrass her or to make her aware of his interest. Lydia, unmoved, returned to Sebastian and the menu, to find him pointing at blurred purple print and listening to the whispered translations of a black-dressed, white-aproned waitress with elaborately coiffed hair and a face ghastly with liquid powder. He did not consult Lydia, but gave the order, ordered also a bottle of Barbera, and then came to rest, gazing round the room with that mild, quizzical smile which

was all his own. His feathery hair was unbrushed; his tie was far to one side; the rims of his finger-nails were still black. But nobody, seeing Sebastian's innocent face, his thoughtfulness, and the lines of laughter about his eyes, could have been predisposed to any feeling but affection. Finally he looked across at Lydia, and the smile deepened.

"I like this," he said, frankly. "I was made for it. There's something—— By God, Lydia, let's go to Italy one time! It would be grand. What I'd like to do would be—— Yes, by Jove, let's get out of England! You think there's only one place in the world." His mood changed while he was speaking. "So there is only one place!" he insisted. "And that place is London! London built on the slime about London Bridge! The greatest, grandest spot in the world. But you ought to see the world, Lydia. You ought to see the world."

"Well? Why not?" asked Lydia, her eyes shining.

"Eh?"

"I say why shouldn't we see a bit of the world? I don't want to see it all!"

Sebastian was taken aback by the promptitude of her demand. His eyelids flickered.

"I'm too old." His head sank. "Besides—— No, old girl; I'm past it."

"Rubbish!" snorted Lydia.

"Well, then, say I'm tied down by the shop. Yes, I'm tied down. But I'll tell you what! When I'm sixty I'll retire. I shall have stuck it long enough, then. We'll sell up, for what we can get. Put it all in the bank. Then we'll travel for a year or two, and come home to die. How's that? At least, I'll do the dying. A year or two longer for you, eh? Don't look up; but there's a black-faced fellow in the corner who can't take his eyes off you. Damn him! I think I'll go and punch his nose, shall I? Ah, he didn't like my saying that. He's reading his

paper now. Why the devil can't he go home? Perhaps he hasn't got a home! It's not everybody——. Ah, here we are!"

The soup had arrived, steaming, crowded with vegetables; and Lydia broke the piece of bread cut from a long tasteless loaf which lay beside her plate. She still glanced at the boisterous Italians, who talked in that unknown language and seemed like rough boys of a larger size. The atmosphere was full of steam and smoke and clamour, which weighed about her ears and excited her. Sebastian's words had excited her. She was thinking: "Silly old thing; silly old thing! Saying he's old! That's the way to *get* old. He's fifty-four! It's old. He's old. I'd like to see the world. I'd like to see and do all sorts of things I never shall. Why can't I? Why shouldn't I?" The exaltation passed with terrible rapidity. Lydia knew that the reason lay, not in Sebastian, as her first impulse declared, but within herself. Alas! The shoulders of that green frock moved, as if Lydia were shrugging. The man sitting by himself in the corner of the room was only pretending to read his paper. He could not possibly read in this din. As clearly as if she had seen him, Lydia knew that immediately above the level of the newspaper his eyes were still steadfastly fixed upon her, coolly, insatiably. She did not again shrug her shoulders, but she was indifferent to him, thinking only of what she and Sebastian were to do when Sebastian was sixty.

As the raw young wine warmed the blood in her veins, Lydia began to feel much more happy than she had done. She knew that she was more animated, and she saw Sebastian's eyes beginning to glow—they never sparkled—behind his old-fashioned spectacles. He was smiling, too, a broad smile which showed his strangely malicious teeth, so small and pointed and yellow. Sebastian's face looked plumper and redder, less like that of a Chinaman. His Englishness grew more and more unmistakable. And Lydia's spirits rose, not tumultuously, but

steadily, because the wine, so far from making her drunk, seemed to be clearing her head and enabling her to grasp all sorts of knowledges that were ordinarily hidden. Not wholly to grasp these knowledges, either, but to be ever upon the point of grasping them, to be as it were upon tiptoe, confident and daring.

"D'you remember how I came up to you at the Vanstones?" Sebastian chuckled. "I said, 'I can't dance, and I can't talk, and I can't entertain you; but you're the most interesting woman in this place, and I'm going to ask your name.' Remember?"

"Yes, I remember," Lydia said, in a dry tone. "I also remember what happened afterwards."

"Which 'what'?" he demanded.

"Mrs. Vanstone."

"What a fool! Forget her! Be like me!"

Lydie reflected.

"All right," she said. "I've forgotten her. But I *do* remember your coming up to me. I was in charge of the eats, and I wasn't supposed to talk to anybody. And anyway, it was a funny thing to say to a kid, wasn't it!"

"You didn't seem to mind."

"I never mind anything," returned Lydia, proudly.

"Oh, yes, you do," said Sebastian. "That's all bosh. As a matter of fact——" He paused, forgot what he was going to say, and relapsed into silence. The wine was affecting him more than it was affecting Lydia. It was increasing his impulse to be reminiscent, but it was also increasing a natural flightiness of thought which made his speech incoherent. "I don't like the Vanstones," he continued. "Never did like them. Oh, of course I lived there; but it wasn't, I mean—— Old Mother Vanstone; and Hubert—my God! I was jealous of that boy!"

"Hubert? Why he was younger than I was!"

"Well, I was older, wasn't I?"

"Silly," murmured Lydia. "Silly to be jealous of anybody."

"I don't know so much. I don't know so much." Sebastian was nodding his head, his lips pursed. "Well, as it happened, Hubert——I forget what I was going to say. But every time I see that chap——"

"See him?" cried Lydia. "Have you seen him, then? You didn't tell me!"

"No," answered Sebastian, quietly. It was as if he had sighed. "No, I didn't tell you."

"Why not?"

Sebastian's eyes were almost closed; he was smiling amiably, mockingly. But he did not say why he had not told Lydia. Instead, he spoke of something else.

"I got hold of a prize yesterday—a first edition of Gray's 'Elegy.' It's a good copy. That's what I was looking over this afternoon."

"Where did you see Hubert?" persisted Lydia. "Aren't you going to tell me?"

"Oh, just in the street." Sebastian frowned. "In the West End, somewhere—I forget. I've met him once or twice. I wish to God you were interested in Gray's 'Elegy,' Lydia. Far better than these young puppies like Hubert."

Lydia laughed at his expression of distaste for Hubert Vanstone.

"It's the live dogs that interest me," she said, cheekily. "Not the dead lions. At least, I suppose this thing's a book or something by somebody dead, or you wouldn't care about it; and Hubert's alive enough——"

"Only half-alive," grumbled Sebastian. "Miserable conceited young devil. What I can't understand is, what he thinks he's got to be conceited about. It's a secret, apparently, between himself and God. H'm." He showed that his thoughts were again elsewhere; and Lydia pressed him no longer. Some more people were crowding into the room—a pretty young girl and a youngish man. The man was tall and thin and cunning-look-

ing; the girl was vividly dressed in flame colour, and she was wearing a moleskin coat and a peaked hat. Smart, smart—she was a smarty! But Lydia's eyes devoured the costume. She saw the girl look across the room to where the solitary diner sat behind his paper, saw her stare boldly, and begin to edge round the tables with the intention of leading her companion thither. The two were lost to Lydia's sight, but a moment later the attentive stranger was standing up, within view, so that Lydia felt sure the coming of the girl in the flame dress must be driving him away. So she hadn't brought it off! He spoke to the waitress, pressed something—presumably a tip—into her hand, and went to the door. The doorway was filled by his bulk, as if annihilated. Lydia saw that he was not as tall as she had imagined from his height when seated, but she could not fail to be impressed by his great breadth, and by the air of dignity with which he carried himself. His hands seemed to hang in the air, beautifully white.

"He thinks he's grand," she meditated, with a grimace. "Napoleon!"

The man turned round quite abruptly, and the slow movement of his head as he surveyed the room and its occupants was full of grace. His eyes came to rest once again upon Lydia's face, and Lydia frowned slightly at his persistence. When she glanced again, the man was gone, and it seemed as if his going had robbed the doorway, and in fact the whole room, of interest. The noisy Italians were still laughing and talking together, but as a spectacle they had ceased to be amusing. Returning to Sebastian, she noticed that he had been observing her, and smiled frankly in return for his dry grin. That grin represented jealousy perpetually showered by ridicule.

"So *he's* gone," Lydia said, composedly. "D'you think he's English?"

"He was reading an English paper," was all Sebastian would say.

"I think he was. I'm glad he's gone. What was it you were going to say about that 'Elegy'?"

Sebastian shook his head.

"I wasn't going to say anything. I wanted you to be staggered at a piece of good luck. But you see you don't understand the business of collecting; and I shall never teach you to understand it, because it doesn't interest you."

Lydia caught the changed note of his voice, both melancholy and spiteful. This was a reproof to her, the more painful for its gentleness; and her eyes suddenly smarted.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "But I never pretended I knew anything." That was all she would ever say, however deeply she was wounded.

"That's quite true," admitted Sebastian. He looked down. Still looking down, he added, as if he were breathless: "I don't want you any different, my dear."

The ghost of a quarrel! It was apparently dismissed; but memory of it would be undying. Lydia thought: "Same old thing. I've disappointed him. I'm always doing it." She could not shrug away such regret. She did not again urge him to explain the importance of his discovery. To have urged, after the fault, would have been, not to study him, but to be boring; and she hoped never to bore him.

"That old Jew man was outside again to-day," she said. "Running after people with his cards. They took them for politeness; but I expect they threw them away as soon as they got home. Why *do* people do that? Why can't they see when they're making fools of themselves? I suppose we're all the same—only we can't see ourselves."

"Hm. All fools," Sebastian reflected. "It's a salutary thought. Well, you see, *I'm* a fool, and *you're*—no, by God; you're *not* a fool—at least, not in that way. We're thinking of different things. If any two people ever thought of the same thing at the same time——"

"They'd ring the bell," Lydia suggested. Then, jokingly, without knowing how much in earnest she was, she added: "They do, often. That's what love is."

"Christ!"

Sebastian ruffled his feathery hair, and returned to his meal. Lydia could see his rueful expression; and she knew that—following his blasphemous ejaculation—he had suppressed a speech which he thought might hurt her feelings. They had nearly finished eating, and in a little while the atmosphere of this little room would be completely poisoned with hanging clouds of tobacco smoke. The warmth would grow unbearable; the smell of cooking, already a threat, would pervade the building. The loud talk, at first a stimulant, would become dull and brazen, voice against voice. Arguments would begin; the long table would be slapped; the walls would swim into indistinctness.

"Let's go!" Lydia said, unaware of the cause of this leaping dread within her. "I don't want any coffee. I want some fresh air. Shall we?"

Without a word, Sebastian obediently rose. She saw him, as of old, winding a long woollen muffler about his neck, saw the dozen familiar tricks of jerked head and delicate forceless fingers and the glint of light from above upon the glass of his spectacles, smiled lovingly, and led the way to the door. They were clambering down the wooden stairs, trying in vain to be quiet; they were among the tables and diners upon the ground floor; they were out at last in the dark street, where a soft wind was blowing. Lydia drew a deep breath of relief.

She was walking briskly along the street, towards Soho Square, when she felt Sebastian seize her arm.

"Hold on a bit!" he gasped.

By the light of a street lamp Lydia could see that he was stooping. Over, over—it seemed that he must fall. His head was lower than his shoulders; the hand upon her arm grew

heavy, fierce, bruising the soft flesh. He was ill. She was alarmed —worse than alarmed. Fear rose with terrible force in her bosom, almost stifling her. Never before had Lydia been so much afraid. The impulse to cry out was almost unconquerable; but she ground her teeth violently together, compelling herself to be rigidly still, checked the ejaculations of fright and sympathy which rose to her lips, and waited breathlessly, her heart thudding like a drum until Sebastian had recovered. The pause seemed to last for an hour; but in reality he straightened himself after a few minutes, and stood erect. The grip upon Lydia's arm was relaxed. She could hear his heavy breathing.

"What was it?" she whispered. "Faint?"

"Nothing," Sebastian answered, taking out a handkerchief and wiping his brow. "Nothing at all."

"Hm. It looked *quite* like nothing at all," grimly threatened Lydia. "Seems to me it's a case of *Doctor* for you."

"Good God, no!" he exclaimed. "What bosh!" Then he laughed. "What utter rot!" he added, breathlessly. "You quite frightened me!"

"How strange!" teased Lydia. Her voice was thick. "I mean, you being frightened."

CHAPTER TWO: THE OLD FOLKS AT HOME

I

Lydia's father and mother lived in two dark and gloomily-furnished rooms upon the first floor of a house in Hornsey Road. Below them was a shop which often changed hands. Sometimes a dressmaker would take it, keeping her sewing machines in the back room behind the shop, and exhibiting dingy frocks in the front window; once it had been filled with chocolates, sugar sticks, and licorice; now a man offered a thin supply of artists' materials, and announced that he would frame pictures. It was an unlucky shop. Nothing succeeded there, perhaps because it stood between an undertaker's and a greengrocer's, so that those who passed did not notice its presence. Mr. and Mrs. Cottar were never surprised if they awakened one morning and saw a canvas-covered cart standing in the roadway below, and heard somebody calling out "Is that the lot, then, Bill?" and then "Ke-Ke-Ke" to the solitary horse as he jerked its head with a sudden pull upon the reins.

Lydia's father was a commercial traveller who earned just enough to save his wife from going out to work. He acted as representative for a very small firm of book publishers specialising in devotional studies, for the publication of which the authors paid; and he also carried some little diaries, calendars, text-cards, and leaflets of which he sometimes sold a number to stationers in the suburbs and small country towns near London. Never a cheerful man, and never a religious man, Tom Cottar grew less cheerful—and perhaps less religious—as business slackened. His arms seemed to become longer, so that rawboned wrists hung from his coat sleeves; his eyes began to protrude from his lean brown cheeks; his feet grew more painful; and a glass of beer and a nap were increasingly the two comforts to which his mind turned as he trudged the streets and with battered jauntiness entered melan-

choly little shops, carrying a heavy bag full of cards and samples. He was developing some eccentricities of manner which did not help him in business, wore his hat, which was too large for him, upon one side, pinched his lips together in a wrinkly way as if he were an old man, and might have been any age between sixty and seventy. In fact, he was fifty-six.

It was generally late in the evening when Tom reached home, and upon this occasion, when he arrived, Lydia had been sitting with her mother for about five minutes in the scrupulously ugly, tidy, and as it were morose living-room in which Tom and Charlotte spent their waking leisure.

It was the kind of room that crushes the spirits, as Hornsey Road is the kind of street that crushes the spirits. The walls were dark—papered with a pattern which, when new, had been considered sumptuous,—and the pictures hanging upon them were equally dark. The brighter colours had faded; the gilt had browned; a film of age hung over all. This was an old room, and those who dwelt in it were prematurely old. Charlotte still swept and dusted, and carefully arranged the ugly little ornaments upon each side of the dead, monumental clock in front of the mirror upon the mantelpiece; but she never threw the ornaments to the floor, and smashed them, and she never persuaded Tom to strip the walls and cover them afresh with a light-coloured distemper. She only washed herself and did her hair in the style she had used twenty years before; and dressed herself in high-bodiced black frocks with white collars and a row of cloth-covered buttons from neck to waist, as she had done for quite as long. It was as if she had died twenty years ago. Poor things! Darker and darker grew the room; darker and darker grew the spirits of Tom and Charlotte; deeper and deeper sank Lydia's heart every time she came to visit them in this mausoleum to lost hope.

Lydia had barely had time to shudder, to remove her outdoor clothes, to answer her mother's inquiries (which were

slowly, thickly uttered, with a kind of anxious but lethargic formality) about Sebastian and herself, and to take a hard chair by the window, when she heard a creaking of the stair, a stumbling footstep, and that kind of smearing noise which is made when somebody's fingers run over a door in the darkness, seeking an invisible handle. A moment later, the handle turned, and the door was flung back, as if with defiance. A figure loomed vaguely in the open space. It was her father.

He peered forward. Even though he was at the other side of the lighted gas, Lydia could perceive the doubt in his manner. She saw the dispirited droop of his shoulders, and the care with which he kept his face averted from her mother as he flung down the heavy bag of samples. His shabbiness did not irk Lydia, because she was used to shabbiness in her men; but her shrewd eye read instantly from his face what his breath made more evident as he came to kiss her. He had been drinking, not a great deal, but enough to take the edge off his intelligence and make him sour with grievances.

"Well, Dad?" cried Lydia, briskly.

There was no instant response.

"He's tired," said her mother, in swift defence. Her eyes, then, were as sharp—at least in recognition of such signs—as Lydia's. "Tired out. That's what it is."

"Fed up," added Tom, in a hoarse voice, looking at neither of them. He had not removed the large bowler hat which hung over one eye. "Fed up with the whole business. The whole business." He let himself relax suddenly into a low wicker chair with a high back, his hands clapping upon his knees as he fell. "The whole business," he ruminated, with immense gravity. As he sat there his eyes seemed to protrude more than ever; his rather bulbous nose stood upon one side; his wrinkled little mouth (which continually promised drolleries that never came) was drawn into an expression of disgust. Above his head was a hanging gas in a cheap frosted glass globe; and it

did not so much light the room as darken the shadowed corners of it. The stained pictures in their chipped frames were only half visible; the faded old furniture, inlaid with twenty years of London soot, stood grimly to attention against the walls; while the gas sent down a mournful yellowness upon that uneasy form in the chair beneath.

"Aren't you going to take your hat off, Dad?" asked Lydia, at last.

He moved with impatience, opening his eyes and scowling.

"Why should I?"

"Well, you can't put your head back."

He plucked off the hat and threw it upon the table beside him.

"Day after day," said Tom. "Day after day, day after day——"

His wife's little mouth—she was a large, stoutly built woman with a rather small round white face—closed tightly. Her eyes, which were also small and round and black, like those of a mouse, moved with great speed as she glanced first at Lydia and then at Tom. It was curious that these eyes could communicate nothing but watchfulness, uneasiness, and a kind of malice; although Charlotte was neither malicious nor watchful by nature, and was only uneasy through loss of confidence in herself and in life.

"They don't give him the stuff to sell," she explained. "Not the *right* stuff."

"Sermons," ejaculated Tom. "Huh!" He gave a low, false laugh. "Sermons! To-day!" The last word represented Pessiism itself; for Tom was not only a sceptic himself, but was even sceptical concerning the entire outlook for religion in an age which resisted sermons in book-form.

Under her breath, the mother went on talking to Lydia.

"He's afraid he'll——" A nod from that heavy-looking head, an expression of concern in that pale face (so like Lydia's

in its pallor, so unlike hers in every other detail) supplied what the speech omitted. Lydia felt her heart sinking. Her mother and father lived so near the border-line of poverty that she knew there could be little in the way of savings. Once this job was lost, it would mean that Sebastian would have to find the money to keep these two poor people alive—Sebastian, who already bore an ample burden. How could he do it? Oh, God! Why was money invented? Why were poor people tormented all their lives by this horrible dread? Money, money, money—not from love of it, but because, unless they had money, they would starve. And Sebastian——

"Oh, cheer up, Dad," begged Lydia, rendered desperate by her own thoughts. "Never say die, you know!"

She heard that low, dreary murmur in her ear:

"They say they can't understand what it is he complains about; and all the time they're grumbling about his orders being down. It disheartens him, day after day. And the black looks, even when nothing's said. It's not as if he could *make* business. You can't *force* people to buy."

"Not *that* muck!" declared Tom, who had heard his wife's every word. "Huh! Sermons!"

Lydia knew that he was ashamed of himself, ashamed that she should have seen him in this stupid condition, afraid that she would tell Sebastian about it—and yet driven to the reiterations of self-defence by something like despair.

"I'm fed up," repeated Tom. "I go in to see these devils, and they insult me. They dodge behind their counters and shout at me. Trying to be dignified. They think it's dignified to be insulting. Pooh! Rabble! Scum! You'd think from the way they go on that I was a savage Alsatian—with my jaws open!"

"What imaginations they've got!" cried Lydia, smiling in spite of her sympathy.

He was annoyed by the interruption.

"No, no. Don't be silly!" he answered, testily. "Well, call it a leper, then. They say, 'Nothing for you, Mr. Cottar. Still got what you sold me last time.' Point to it. Of course, it's all Wild West stuff they're after, now. Wild West or Wallace. You offer them 'Suffer Little Children,' and they show you: 'Keep Out: This Means YOU.' That's what the world's come to. That's the new religion. 'Keep Out!' "

"Poor Dad!" murmured Lydia.

"It's so discouraging," her mother added. "When he's *got* to go in."

" 'Blessed Are the Meek,' indeed!" groaned Tom. "Well, I've been meek enough; and I'm damned if I see where the blessing comes in. I'm *damned* if I do. They take you for a doormat." His eyes closed, peeped fiercely and timidly at Lydia, and closed again. Suddenly: "How's Sebastian?" he growled. "I'd have come in to see him; but I haven't been myself. Besides, what's the good of coming with a tale like mine?"

"Your dad's been very poorly all this last week," supplemented Mrs. Cottar, before Lydia could reply. "His teeth—— He's not himself. He's reely not himself. You know, he seems as if he couldn't eat. And he gets home so tired. It's just *tiredness*——"

And about three glasses of beer, thought Lydia. He can't stand much. She nodded.

"You want a change," she said aloud. "Seaside air."

Her mother gave a grunt that was intended as a laugh.

"Seaside air!" she murmured. "Who's to pay for seaside air?"

"Well, I dunno," Lydia exclaimed. She paused, so unanswerable was that question. Then she had an inspiration. The thought was quite new to her; but it seemed incontrovertible. "It seems to me that where there's a will there's a way. I don't see why people like you and Dad should go fumbling about all the time, while other people, no better than you are, and

p'rhaps not as good, blossom and bud like the roses. Why *should* they? You make up your mind to seaside air, and you'll get it. I don't know how; but *somehow*. Take your chances. But if you make up your mind to *this*——" She broke off, expressively. "That's what I've come to think. How about it, Dad?"

He shook his head.

"'Make up your mind,'" he repeated, gloomily. "'Ask, and it shall be granted unto you.' Well, *ask*, and see what happens! May just as well ask for a million as twenty pounds. I've taken one order to-day. If I was to make up my mind to take a dozen orders, there'd be plenty more who would make up *their* mind not to give them to me. Where do we stand then?"

"That's where faith comes in," suggested Lydia. "Confidence."

"Yes, and walks out again," Tom retorted. "Like I have to." He sighed deeply, and once more closed his eyes.

There was a melancholy silence.

"Well," persisted Lydia. "I'm not criticising you, Dad; but I believe you've got into the way of thinking, 'They won't give me anything here.' I don't believe you go in all of a sparkle."

"Sparkle!" groaned Tom. "Good God!"

"Lydia!" Her mother's reproach was like a hiss. "Your dad's tired!"

"That's what the French call 'defeatism,'" Lydia said, obstinately. "Believing you're beaten before the fight begins."

"Call *what?*" shouted Tom, starting forward. "Oh, don't talk to me about the French. I never expected to have *them* thrown in my face. French! Huh!" He fell back, glaring.

"I didn't throw them in your face. It was a word," cried Lydia, very uncomfortably. "I said nothing about the French."

"Yes, you did," he growled.

"*Nasty* people," whispered Mrs. Cottar, trembling.

Unconsciously, Lydia had disturbed a wasp's nest. How on

earth was she to know that they didn't like the French? What had happened to make them dislike the French, anyhow?

"Why, what's the matter with them?" she demanded. "Sebastian says——"

"Sebastian—ph!" Tom brought an unsteady forefinger into play. "I'll tell you this about the French: they're no good! You say they've got a word for knowing when they're beaten. I can believe it. I can *quite* believe it. The English haven't; but the French *have*. Very significant! The French have got all the words for bad things—plenty of words. Bad things, see! But they haven't got any words for righteous things. Ask a Frenchman what word he's got for 'home.' He hasn't got one! Ask him what word he's got for 'wife.' He hasn't got one! Ask him what word he's got for 'bath-towel.' He hasn't got one! And you're going to tell me that that doesn't give the French away? You needn't trouble. I know what *I* think. And don't let me hear you say I go into *any* shop like a Frenchman, because I don't. I go in like an Englishman. And come out like one, too—without an order!"

He was quivering with excitement, and his lips were pursed together, surrounded with wrinkles, while the Adam's apple in his throat ran up and down like a piston-rod.

"Hm; I'd better leave this," thought Lydia. "Dangerous." Aloud, she asked: "What's the new man downstairs like? Pictures and stuff, isn't he?"

"He's like a mouse," answered her mother, leaping at the diversion in a flurry. "You wouldn't know he was there. In fact, I've never seen him."

Another pause. Lydia tried again:

"Heard anything of Alice or anybody?"

"She never writes." It was a low grumble, as if Mrs. Cottar had said, "*Nobody* ever takes any notice of me"; and Lydia was quick to retort:

"Well, do *you*?"

There was no answer. Alice was Lydia's sister, and she lived in Australia with a boastful and ungenial husband whose recorded prosperity contrasted with his stinginess towards his wife's relations. Alice was eight years older than Lydia, and had been married and exiled for a dozen years, so that memory of her (ill-supported by a faltering correspondence) was vague; but to Mrs. Cottar Alice's silence, Alice's exile, Alice's indifference were a continual source of depressive emotion. Waves of this emotion could be felt in the room for a few seconds: then, mastering herself, and brightening somewhat, Mrs. Cottar made the next sacrifice to conversation.

"Mrs. Nipp's worried about her daughter," she brought out, with a rather muffled air of furtive pleasure.

"What, the fat girl with the fringe?" Lydia was indifferent, but patient. "What's she been doing?"

A sidelong glance of great meaning shot from those bright eyes.

"That's just it," said Lydia's mother.

"But she's only been married five or six months," protested Lydia. "Hasn't had time to do much, you'd think."

"Well, her husband's—— He says she's always out with this fellow. And they *treat* him so badly, as if it wasn't his business. All of them. Mrs. Nipp's quite angry with him for making a fuss, for all that she's in a bit of a fur about Nance. You'd think young women hadn't got any duties—only rights."

"Oh, that's all this stuff in the papers," Lydia said. "But any way, if she's no good—and I never thought she *was*——"

"They're all doing it," interrupted Mrs. Cottar. "All the young married women. All going with other men."

"Lucky girls!" exclaimed Lydia, laughing. "With men so scarce. *I* never get a chance."

"Ssh!" cried Mrs. Cottar, with a shocked expression. "Oh, Lydia, that's nasty *French* talk. I never thought I'd hear you say a thing like that. Never!"

"Hoh! I say worse than that," retorted Lydia.

"I don't b'lieve you," said Mrs. Cottar, but with a suspicious glance. "Thank God, I don't b'lieve you. Nothing's worse than that. When a young married woman starts going with other men . . . 'Chance,' indeed! You don't *want* a chance. You'd get it easy enough——"

"I wonder," mused Lydia, mischievously.

Her mother sat brooding, a line of disapproval furrowing her white brow. Seeing with what seriousness the matter was taken (but then, so was any other matter!), Lydia, with a shrug, resisted her first impulse to embroider the flippancy. As she reflected, however, she gradually became impressed with the truth of what she had said as a joke. Other young women, nowadays, seemed to be able to enjoy a good deal of forbidden fruit. Lots of them. You wouldn't stop that by saying, "Ssh!" Lydia's smile deepened. Her mother (and all those who felt as she did) would say, "Ssh!" to the sound of the last trump.

"Well, it may be a funny thing, Mother," she remarked. "But the fact is I've never *had* a chance——"

"You don't want it!" cried Mrs. Cottar.

"I s'pose the men don't think I look a sport."

Her mother's expression became more and more angry and uncomfortable. The silence of the room was leaden with melancholy. It crushed Lydia, who felt that it continued without end. Outside in the street even the omnibuses no longer chattered; the general hum of sound had diminished; there was a sense that night had fallen.

Five minutes passed. Six. Seven. It was always thus. Lydia could never begin a conversation with her mother or her father which arrived at any point but a junction where all changed and all parted with gloom. She sat for a little while, saying nothing, while Tom appeared to sleep in the armchair, and her mother sat upright, keeping quite still. One could almost hear their hearts beating, and the steady breathing of all three. But

gradually Tom opened one eye, and as that eye opened Lydia saw another—her mother's—whisk a bright sharp spear in her direction; with the result that (in spite of all depression) she began once again to smile broadly. They were like an old dog in a kennel and an old mouse in the wainscot! Her face was lighted up by the smile. It gave sharpness and even beauty to her features; and her teeth, which were very regular, gleamed in the semi-darkness. And, as Lydia smiled, both those disapproving eyes disappeared, flying, as it were, for safety from her harshness of judgment. How they feared her! And how little Lydia realised this. No answering smile occurred in either serious face. Defensive disapproval was in sole charge. All, as before, was silence.

II

It was ten minutes later.

"Well, you're a pair of chatterboxes, I *must* say!" remarked Lydia. "It cheers me up to sit here and listen to all the bright prattle. Not a bit like home. But of course I can't stay listening all the evening, or I should be spoilt; and I think I'll have to go and see if Sebastian's getting into mischief."

Mrs. Cottar sat up. She had evidently been alarmed by Lydia's tone, as well as by her own late reflections upon men and women, duty, temptation, and opportunity. These were problems ever present to her mind, problems to which she found no solution in all that she read in the newspapers concerning the modern woman.

"Mischief?" she cried, in a troubled tone. "Lydia, I'm sure *he* never gets into any mischief. It's always such a happiness to me."

"Can't be sure, Ma!" warned Lydia. "Look at Dad, there. You'd think butter wouldn't melt in his mouth."

"It hardly would," said her mother, stoutly.

"The lion-heart!" exclaimed Lydia, gazing down at Tom with a smile in which pity, love, and a kind of uncontrollable contempt all had their place. "His name's William Dreadnaught."

Upon her mother's face not a shadow of a smile. Only an expression of weariness and discouragement, of fear, not that Tom would ever be false to her, but that both might presently have to face disaster. That other expression, of smothered exultation in the nature of Mrs. Nipp's troubles, had gone. Lydia sighed, almost shuddered, and rose to her feet with a startling jump. She must go. She could bear this no longer. Screams would force themselves from her throat if she were compelled to sit through another ten minutes such as the last. And, as she jumped, Tom clucked his tongue in reproof. The floor seemed to rattle—or was it the window?—as if a bomb had fallen in the roadway near by. The cheap old pictures frowned from the dingy walls; the gas burned dully; Lydia felt her heart bursting, and walked sedately to the bedroom in which her hat and coat had been laid.

With an air of reproach, her mother followed, treading unheard in her crimson felt slippers.

"You never stay long now," she said. "You're always in a hurry to go."

Lydia, before the glass over the mantelpiece, peeped at her mother's reflection. She saw that large white face as expressionless as ever against the dull background of the ugly wall, and that little mouth quietly closed, the brightness of those small eyes heightened by contrast with surrounding pallor. Something prompted her to say:

"Yes, I'm nasty. You said it yourself. I'm hard."

"Hard to please," answered her mother. "Not like you used to be."

"I've learnt a lot." Lydia powdered her nose, bending closer to the glass in order critically to observe the effect. In a lower

tone, half to herself, she added: "But whether it's any good to me, or not, I can't say." A feeling of unhappiness had seized her: she was impatient to be gone.

"You're always in a hurry," repeated her mother. "So I never get a chance to have a real talk. You know, I think of something when you're not here, and say, 'I must remember to tell her that'; and when you come I forget it, or we fall jangling, like this evening, because you annoy your father when he's tired, or say something you don't mean."

"Yes, well, I'm sorry, Ma. But it's not *me* that gets excited," Lydia murmured. "Sometimes I wish it was. Then I could let off steam, instead of——"

Her mother was not listening.

"I wish I saw more of you, Lydia. Make a difference to me. I don't get much change, you know." The low voice was lower. The little eyes were turned away.

"No." Lydia stopped powdering her nose. Self-criticism mounted. What a beast she was! This poor old thing—— She would have thrown down her gloves, would have removed her hat, would have stayed in a mood of kindness, if that level voice of complaint had not proceeded:

"And Dad never sees anything of you, either. He often says so. It's bad for him. He misses you. He gets home so tired, after tramping round all day, and he doesn't want any supper, but just sits in his chair, half-asleep, until I make him eat a little. And then he goes right off till bedtime." The tale ended in a sigh. "I don't know what's to become of us. He'll lose his job, and then it won't be easy to get another one. He's too old. They want *young* men nowadays. Sometimes it seems as if it would be better if we were dead. It's not as if anybody cared whether we were alive or dead."

"Now, Mother, that's silly," expostulated Lydia, with pain. "And you know it's silly."

Her mother looked down. The little mouth was hard; and

the little eyes glittered. A tall, broad shadow—a grotesque of herself—darkened the wall behind her.

"There's a lot you seem to think silly *now*," she murmured bitterly. "You never used to."

"You'd think I could help growing up," answered Lydia, sighing in turn. "Well, I can't. Doesn't do any good me saying I'm the same, or anything. Because I'm not the same. I think differently. When Dad talks about the French and that, he's just blowing off froth. Why don't you make him take you out sometimes? Get rid of the cobwebs. Take your mind off things. Do you both a world of good."

"He's too tired to walk," said her mother, as if obstinately.

"No need to walk. Go to the pictures."

"Ach!" exclaimed Mrs. Cottar. "I'd as soon go down the drain. I hate the nasty things. All about *nasty* things. You get plenty of them in your own life, and in the papers, without having them jumped about in front of you in a picture—all about sin and sinners and nasty stuff."

Lydia put on her gloves.

"Oh, well, there's plenty of nasty things to choose from," she observed quickly. "I'm glad I'm not the only thing that's nasty. And there's nastier than me, I shouldn't wonder."

Her mother made no reply. Her eyes glittered. She did not speak again until they were once more in the presence of that sprawling figure in the chair. Lydia, looking down, felt sure that her father had been sitting staring towards the bedroom door, listening, and that he had closed his eyes very tightly at their coming. He was only half in shadow, sitting under the gas globe with his head low and his knees high and his clothes hanging as limp as an empty sack. His lips were drawn together, and the wrinkles about them were still deepened by that disapproving compression which so closely resembled disgust. Battered and discouraged, Tom offered nothing but his shabbiness and his failure to Lydia's keen gaze; her mother, too, in

her high-necked black dress with the white collar and the row of buttons from neck to waist, seemed to have become merely inert and resetful. And yet she *had* loved both; her heart had not always been thus hard, and her thoughts as little tinged with merciful loving-kindness. Where lay the fault? Was it only in herself? She felt it to be so. How cruel she had grown!

Bending unexpectedly, Lydia kissed Tom's cheek, straightened in time to avoid a bump from his head as he jerked up his shoulders, and embraced her mother. Nobody spoke. They seemed to be parting in shame or displeasure that was almost exultant. As she closed the door of the sitting-room behind her, Lydia shivered violently and ran down the bare boarded stairs skimble-stamble, with feathery heels, as if the black dog of terror were in pursuit.

III

"Well!" she found herself ejaculating, as she walked quickly along Hornsey Road. "*Well!*"

What was it? She had displeased them. But they had been so silly. She had behaved badly. Wicked! And she had run away when she should have remained.

"No, it's not *that*," thought Lydia. "Only I just couldn't bear it. *Them*, I mean."

She walked on. The lamps were alight, and the sky was dark. Many of the shops were closed, and those that were open were shabbily half in darkness. A motor-omnibus roared past; then a dirty old car, which a woman was driving. The houses and shops towered over her head, not grimly, but as if they were forlorn—conscious of their unkempt air and of the unhappy slovens who toiled fitfully and listlessly within them, and ate greasy fried fish lately drawn from the sizzling fat at a shop near by, and listened to the comic turns upon the wireless, tired,

stale, and dreary even while they laughed loudly or masticated their suppers. This was certainly a very depressing street; it became more depressing every time Lydia visited those two hopeless rooms above the ill-fated shop and came away in a mood to be troubled by the lowering houses.

"Well, there's something the matter with me," she said to herself. "And that poor old man—ashamed because he'd had a glass or two of beer, and cantankerous about the French, and all that. Yes, but he's lost heart. So's she. Both of them. They're both blaming me because I'm beastly to them. Quite right. I am. But then they think I've got nothing to worry about. Funny, you never think other people have got worries—unless they tell you about them. And that's worse than anything! Yes, well, I *haven't* got anything to worry about—not really, I haven't. Only what I make up. And it's no good, I *do* think they're both stupid. They want shaking. So solemn about it. They're frightened. That's what it is. They're frightened, and they don't know how to hide it." Her thoughts flew into a jumble.

For a time she lost all sense of direction. At Grove Road, along which she should have turned, she crossed and continued upon her way down the Hornsey Road. It was only when she came breast of some grimy flats, once noticed and never forgotten, and when, far ahead, she saw the sparkle of a tramcar in Seven Sisters Road, that some unconscious memory stirred and checked her progress. What? Where was she? She had come wrong. Aiee! Upon the sudden impulse, she turned in haste with the object of retracing her steps, and came violently into contact with a man who had been walking a couple of yards behind. So vehement was their impact that each, by similar instinct, gave the other a little self-protective push, staggered, and pushed past. Still confused, Lydia heard a murmur of apology, murmured in turn, and walked rapidly round the corner and past the newspaper shop in Grove Road, into the

comparative darkness that followed. She was breathing rather quickly.

Her thoughts, too, had been jolted by this collision. They were still uncomfortable thoughts, but they were upon a different theme. She remembered Sebastian's faintness of the previous evening, and her heart jumped in alarm. Ought she to have left him? She had been stricken by one sense of duty; and now she was stricken by another. Was he safe, alone in the shop? He had never before, as far as she knew, suffered from such a faintness; but what if there had been other occasions, of which she had never heard? He would not have mentioned them. Trust Sebastian! He spoke to her of nothing —*nothing*. Too bad! Too bad! Why didn't he? Because she was stupid? Because he thought she wouldn't be interested? Lydia's head was shaken. That wasn't it. He was only afraid of alarming her; he didn't think enough of himself; he wouldn't think it mattered——

"A-ach!" she gasped, with impatience. "If he'd think *more* of himself! If he'd put his foot down, and let some of these people——"

It was familiar ground: she had no need to cover it afresh. Instead of asserting himself, he smiled quietly, like a Chinaman, bowing, folding his arms together, stepping back. It seemed as if he withdrew before the braggarts, giving way to them, going along his own side path so gently that even she, at times, was stupid, and took advantage of his kindness.

"Never again!" thought Lydia, with her teeth set. "Never again! He's too good. He's——"

Blindly, she stepped into the roadway, faltered. . . . There was a screech from a motor horn, a man's shout, and then—still dazed, but with her heart thrumming tumultuously in her throat—she was pulled savagely back by a very strong arm. What had happened? Excitement, fear, sickness, a wild trembling of her whole body, seemed instantaneous. Con-

fusedly, she realized that the car had drawn up at a distance of half-a-dozen yards. A head emerged from it. Impossible, in this darkness, to distinguish the man's features; but a surge of wrath led her to take a single unsteady step towards the car.

"Did I get her?" came a voice. "Eh?"

"All right," slowly answered another voice. It was a very calm voice, not quite English in its intonation, although English in its calm. "You were too fast. Don't take them so sharp another time. Get on!"

Lydia did not fail, even then, to catch the slight accent. Clearly the speaker was no Londoner. The words were said so slowly she felt they might be spoken in a language that was strange to him. A foreigner? But the exchange of voices had quickly cleared her head of its unconcern with her surroundings. Trembling still, she saw the car swerve and drive slowly away, its one red eye watching grimly from behind. Then, alert once more, she cried breathlessly:

"What happened? Did he run me down? What an idiot! I'm all right, thanks. He didn't touch me. I'm only excited."

The stranger whose arm had jerked her back was a fairly tall, solid built man, not young, who wore a long coat of some kind and a hard felt hat. Lydia could not clearly see his face, as there was no street lamp near.

"You weren't looking where you were going," he told her. "That was the trouble. But I didn't tell *him* that, of course."

Was he a German? A Jew? The voice was very deep, very soft, a little harsh. Rather an attractive voice, though.

"Well, I'm much obliged to *you,*" Lydia said, trying to guess at his features and his expression. "That man ought to have sounded his horn."

"He did," said the stranger. "Several times. And you didn't hear him. Too busy. You're not safe, you know, walking along like this. You bumped into me a moment ago. I think you want looking after."

"Nonsense!" cried Lydia. "Did I bump into you? Where? What, round the corner?" She remembered. "Well, what are you doing *here*, then? Following me?"

"I thought you were in trouble," said the slow, hesitating voice. "You jumped round so suddenly, as if you were desperate about something. I thought I'd come this way, too. It doesn't matter to me which way I go." He shrugged his broad shoulders.

Lydia stared at the man. There seemed to be something familiar in the carriage of those lifted shoulders, and in the shape of his dark cheeks; but she could not see him clearly enough to be sure of her perception.

"Well!" she exclaimed. "D'you mean you thought I was *potty*?"

There was a gleam of white teeth.

"No," said the quiet voice. "Don't misunderstand me. You see, I caught sight of you last night; and you came running out of a shop just now as I was passing. I saw you distinctly in the shop-light. I just happened to be walking——"

"Last night," murmured Lydia, staring. She looked again, trying hard to recognise him.

"It was an impulse. I followed you. I was interested."

"Yes, I bet you were." Lydia spoke under her breath. "Well," she added, "as it happens, it was very lucky for me. I might have had a nasty accident. And I'm much obliged to you. Only, I say, don't do it again, will you."

"It might be safer," said the man, "if I walked with you to your home. It would be *nasty*"—her own word was repeated with slight stress—"for your husband if you had a *real* accident."

"Yes," agreed Lydia. "Be nasty for him all right. But there's no risk: I've had a lesson."

"I wish I could think any of us profit by our 'lessons,' " she heard.

"Good-night," said Lydia.

"You won't allow me?"

"No. But I must admit I'd like to know where you saw me before."

"Don't you know? At the restaurant."

"Ah!" Lydia gave a cry.Then: "Golly! Napoleon! *I* remember you!" Her heart gave a spring. "How funny!" she pictured again the steady gaze with which he had regarded her the dignified carriage; the beautiful hands.

"*Now* may I come?" he asked, again smiling.

"By no means," retorted Lydia; although she too smiled. "Less than ever. I must go alone. But thanks for saving me from the car. Good-night."

He raised his hat as she went; and Lydia, walking briskly, was tempted again and again to look back, in case he should be following. With a tremendous effort she fixed her eyes straight ahead until she had crossed Holloway Road and had to some extent recovered composure. Even then, as she allowed herself in Fairmead Road to flick one backward glance, she could have persuaded herself that he was there, far behind, in the darkness; and her heart beat a little faster at the imagining.

CHAPTER THREE: THE YOUNG MAN

I

ALTHOUGH Lydia was late in getting him, the shop was still lighted—the one illumination in a row of dark shutters. She had been very sure of it. And when at last she arrived before that crowded window, with its china, pictures, mats, and ironware, she was again greatly excited, so that her fingers seized the handle of the shop-door with unwonted impetuosity. Just so would a strong child have run indoors from school and her playmates, hot with news of a minor triumph. Colour was in her cheeks; her heart was beating; she was ready, for once, to greet Sebastian with all the exuberance of juvenile high spirits. Never had her head been carried so high or with such archness. But then, never before had Lydia savoured such an adventure as the one from which she was now returning.

Alas, the moment of arrival was spoiled!

Ting! rang the bell above her head. Ting! Trrring! With Sebastian's name upon his lips, she stopped dead. Speech faded. Movement, even, was paralysed. A customer was in the shop! Worse still was Sebastian's manner, which sent Lydia's jubilant spirits instantly into obedient flatness. She had come, bursting with news; and Sebastian, preoccupied with his customer, merely glanced at her mildly and significantly over his glasses. It was not a severe or an intentionally repressive glance; but it contained warning. She caught the lightest, the most evanescent of frowns at her boisterousness, as if she had spoiled, by that plunging entry, some intricacy of tactics. Business! It must always take first place, since without business they would starve, and descend totally into wretchedness. Or so at last they feared. How stupid she was! How stupid and clumsy! Lowering her head, Lydia closed the door with care and proceeded towards the stairs without making a sound.

In the centre of the shop, amiably inert, Sebastian stood facing a tall, fair, thin young man. The young man, who had also been discomposed by the abrupt opening of the door, was holding in his hands a book; and Sebastian's glance returned at once to its pages. He resumed an interrupted speech, delivered in a very low, confidential, and almost reverent tone, while the young man fingered a page, his head bent, listening to what Sebastian was saying. Creeping past, Lydia received the impression that this customer was good-looking, about thirty years of age, rather too tall for the breadth of his slightly bowed shoulders, and dressed with the oddness which she associated with those who bought beautiful things from Sebastian. For the rest, the two men stood in a poor light, and as they both seemed to be intent upon the book, Lydia passed them without pausing for a moment.

She was half way up the flight of confusedly-covered stairs which led to the upper floor, when she stopped, feeling suffocated by the old mustiness of the atmosphere. And as she stopped, she looked back and down upon those two absorbed figures. They were unmoved, immovable. Sebastian continued to regard the book with reverence, hovering vaguely near it, with one hand lightly touching his chin, as if he stroked an invisible beard; and the young man's very long white fingers continued, as it were, to caress the yellowed pages which he so delicately held in his two hands. But whereas Lydia saw only the feathery top of Sebastian's head, she surprisedly became aware that the young man, who had appeared to be listening attentively to Sebastian, was in reality following with his eyes her own quick progress to the upper floor. The perception was enough to cause Lydia to hasten her steps; and a moment later she was in the bedroom, throwing off her hat with one generous movement, and walking towards the board window.

All was as before. Below, the passers dawdled as they al-

ways did; the chocolate-coloured tramcars ground solemnly to and from their stopping-place at the corner. Lydia jerked her head upwards with impatience of this predictable scene. Then, stooping, she picked from the floor a comb which the floating window-curtain had brushed from the dressing-table. Always, when there was any breeze, and when the door was suddenly opened, this curtain rose sweepingly and played over the edge of the table. One day something would be broken or lost. She must be quieter. She must learn to come into the room, whatever her mood, with a uniform sedateness! Into the shop, also! She hoped that what she had spoiled below was not irremediable. She realised now that the shock had made her feel a little sick.

"Oh dear!" groaned Lydia, in pretended horror at her own shortcomings. "I suppose I shall learn by the time I'm an old woman. If not, I'd better die!" She looked at her face in the mirror, meeting steadily the grave, ironic eyes which she saw reflected there. "Hm," she added, in unconscious mimicry of Sebastian. "Fat lot of good *you* are!"

And with that cry of self-dissatisfaction she turned from the mirror, to bathe her face and change her dress before running down to the kitchen. She had grown sombrely thoughtful, and her movements were much slower and heavier than they had been. When at last, for the purpose of brushing her hair, she again approached the mirror, she was surprised to hear a deep sigh which must have issued from her own lips.

"Hullo! What's the matter?" Lydia demanded of that fast-paling face. But she did not answer her own question. Indeed, her mind had flown to another subject. It had flown to the stranger. Napoleon! How that ribald nickname had jumped from her tongue! And again, with equal rapidity, to the glimpse she had so lately had from the stairs of Sebastian's head. Her own head was shaken. The decision was instant. With a quick grimace, she added: "I shan't say anything!"

II

A moment later, stepping as impetuously as ever—despite her resolve—from the bedroom, she came face to face with Mrs. Way, who was making a laborious progress to the upper floor, laden with marketing.

"Oh, how tired I am!" gasped Mrs. Way, forlornly, from under her draggled-looking hat. "I don't know *when* I've felt so tired!"

She set down the threadbare grey bag with the leather handles and breathed hard. Lydia's heart sank. She was caught.

"Oh, well, you're finished now," she said, comfortingly. "That's one thing."

"Pretty well done, too," was Mrs. Way's rather tart answer. "What d'you think the greengrocer's just asked me for cauliflower? Eightpence! Eightpence and tenpence, he said. I said to him, 'Good gracious! You must think I'm *made* of money.' He said, 'I think you're pure gold, ma'am.' You wouldn't find Edgeland saying a thing like that. He's too surly. You know what *that's* caused by, Mrs. Rowe. The drink. He's in and out of the public all the evening. And then of course Edgeland's always got it in the house, you see; and I know for a fact that when the shop's closed he sits indoors by the fire with a bottle and a glass. *Quite* the toper. Well, I never buy of him now; and Mrs. Spether's the same. I said to her, 'Oh, Mrs. Spether, I don't like the *look* of that man,' and she said, 'You're quite right, Mrs. Way.' She said, 'He drinks.' And I said, 'Well, I know he does.' She said, 'And what's more,' she said, 'it's not only *him*——' Of course I knew who she meant; but now *I've* always found Mrs. Edgeland very obliging, and I've never seen anything of that sort about her; but poor people like me can't afford eightpence for cauliflower, you know, and so I got parsnips instead; though, myself, I don't care so much for parsnips——"

Lydia found herself staring at Mrs. Way.

"I've never seen Edgeland," she said, suddenly. "Or Mrs. Edgeland. I don't know them."

Mrs. Way inclined her head, and her expression was incredulous. She was a foot shorter than Lydia, and very thin. Her black frock and the musty old fur which she wore about her throat made her look as if she were especially meagre and short-necked. The hat which concealed her greying hair was black and shapeless. Her thin face was wrinkled; the eyes gaped a little; her mouth was small but loose, from much talking; and the pink tip of her insignificant nose appeared to itch every few minutes. She had an air of watching the lips of anybody she was with, in order (as those lips moved, preparatory to speech) to dash in with rigmarole.

"Isn't that a horrible thing about all those children being murdered by their father!" she proceeded. "Didn't you see? He came home, and he was annoyed because there was no dinner. So he took a knife, and murdered all his children. One after the other. I hope they'll hang him, quick; because really a man like that's a danger. And he's not the only one, Mrs. Rowe; because even the best of men go queer at times—— I mean, supposing anybody——"

"I don't think Mr. Rowe would do such a thing," interposed Lydia, hastily. "He's always so mild, even when he's hungry."

"Oh, I didn't mean—— Good gracious, no. But think what all those poor little children—— I can't bear to think of it. All their dear little faces, and the blood streaming—— That man must be a brute. How anybody could take a knife to their own dear little children—— Of course, there's something behind it. Where was the mother? I mean, a man doesn't take a knife to his children——"

"He was hungry," objected Lydia, mischievously. "And a hungry man hasn't got a conscience."

Mrs. Way brushed aside the impertinence.

"No, but what was the mother doing, do you think? The paper says she was 'out.' But you can very well see what that means, although they don't say. Leaving the children. And a knife, too. I mean, it seems as if she *wanted* something to happen, doesn't it! It wasn't only that he was hungry, Mrs. Rowe. He must have been angry about something, too. And it's very likely they'll make him out insane, and send him to Broadmoor; and that means he'll be let out again presently; and *then* where shall we be, Mrs. Rowe?"

"I shall hide," said Lydia. "But at present I've got to——"

"Did you see that about the young girl——" began Mrs. Way, her eyes glittering.

"What *I* think is that you're too tired to stand talking," said Lydia, kindly.

"Oh, that's all right." Mrs. Way brushed aside all thought of danger. "No, this young girl, it seems——"

"And I've got to get my husband's supper. You've frightened me with your story. I can just see him sharpening the knife because his dinner's not ready——"

"Oh, he wouldn't do anything to you!" cried Mrs. Way, laughing in three quick little jerks of flat sound. "He's not that sort of a man. Besides, you're so big and strong! You're *much* stronger than he is, I'm sure. And besides, the man in the paper killed all his children; and you haven't *got* any children." Her eyes sharpened.

"That's true!" cried Lydia, cheerfully. "How lucky! And now I really must run!"

She ran, deaf to the opening words of another speech from Mrs. Way.

How about that young fellow? Was he still there? Yes! He was standing exactly as he had done when she paused upon her upward journey. But Sebastian was no longer beside him. Sebastian was nearer the door of the shop, reaching over a buhl

cabinet to some shelves behind. His back was to Lydia. She could see the shiny seat of his blue serge trousers, and her eyebrows flew up. Poor man! But Sebastian was unconscious of her approach and her pity. He was concerned only with the object for which he was searching. So, it at first appeared, was the young man, and for this reason Lydia was able to form a quick judgment of him as she ran.

Her first impression had been accurate enough; but it had missed some significant details. It was true that the young man was too tall for his breadth, and that he stooped; but he was very graceful. His long arms now hung straight down from his shoulders, and the length and delicacy of those white hands was clearly revealed. He was fair and clean shaven. A broad-brimmed black soft felt hat shaded his features, but Lydia could see that there was great refinement in the pale face and in the lines of his rather prominent mouth. She was interested, and looked again, more closely, at the young man. This time he showed that he had seen her, and indeed Lydia was at the foot of the stairs, so that her presence was no longer to be ignored. Their eyes met frankly; his dark, soft, and with a peculiar ardour glowing within; Lydia's calm and clear. Then, as Lydia passed, Sebastian, a little breathless, struggled back to his feet and an erect posture, after stretching over the buhl cabinet, holding a very small porcelain figure of a girl in his extended hand.

"This was what I meant," he panted. "You see——"

What Sebastian said further to the stranger regarding the porcelain figure Lydia did not hear. The handle of the door leading below squeaked as her fingers turned it. She was in the darkness of the basement flight, smiling, but panic-stricken at the sound of a clock striking nine. How late! Something seemed to have lightened Lydia's heart again, in spite of Sebastian's frown. She whistled as she set her first saucepan in its place upon the stove, and found herself listening for that

ringing of the shop-bell which would show that Sebastian, amid the litter of antiquity by which he was incessantly surrounded, was once more alone.

III

When Sebastian came to supper, she had already forgotten Mrs. Way. She had thoughts only for Sebastian. For one thing, he was looking ill; for another, he was visibly depressed. Deep perpendicular creases above his eyebrows revealed, not thought, but irritability. Danger signals for Lydia! She was alert.

"I heard Mother Way catch you," Sebastian said, grumblingly. "What was she droning about?"

"Oh, she's got a murder to gloat over. And she's got off with the new greengrocer." Lydia glanced over her shoulder with an air of carelessness.

"Hm," grunted Sebastian. "Poor fool. Always the same. Always was." He was silent. There was a long pause, at the end of which he continued: "You never saw the late Way, did you? He had a club-foot. They were the most miserable-looking pair in the whole world. And yet he wasn't a bad chap. A couple of brandies, and he'd begin to talk like a book."

"A pair of them, then," said Lydia. The picture appalled her. "I should think they must have been a little Tower of Babel."

Sebastian shook his head.

"No," he corrected. "She'd always listen to him. She worshipped him. She's not like you."

He darted a glance from under his brows, and ruffled his hair with an irritable gesture.

"Yes, you'd look down your nose if I started worshipping, wouldn't you!" said Lydia, drily. "It's nicest as a dream."

"I should do more than look down my nose. I should think you were putting arsenic in my food."

"Oh, Sebastian!" Lydia was horrified. "That's nasty of you!"

Sebastian nodded his head until he looked like an automaton.

"Well, I feel nasty. I feel as if I could kick myself. By God, I do! Damn! I had a gaseous Irishman in about a month ago with a picture that he said was worth a thousand pounds, and I didn't believe him. I didn't like the fellow's manner, in fact. I thought he was piling it on too thick."

"He took it somewhere else, I suppose."

"I told him to. But he took it to Christie's. It's fetched fifteen hundred."

Lydia's breath caught at the immensity of the sum.

"Oh, well," she said, quickly and with raillery, "I must make this old dress last another season."

Sebastian gave her a sharp look—as black as thunder.

"I don't know my job," he said. "I'm half-baked. In fact, I'm no good. Not a scrap! If I'd been any good, you'd have been living in a decent house——"

"Bored to death, I expect," Lydia reminded him, "with nothing to do."

"Well, then, *I* should have had a decent house; and some leisure and freedom. But just because I'm a fool, we go on pigging here; with Mother Way chattering about murder." He pushed his knife and fork impatiently away from him, across the table. "Chattering about murder—the whole world's doing that. It's the modern disease. Murder, murder, murder! It's a sure sign of decadence. But the fact is that I feel you're being wasted here, Lydia. Wasted."

He seemed to be unable to bear anything near him.

"You'd better wait till *I* start thinking that, hadn't you?" warned Lydia. "Don't push the things about, either."

"You'll soon start thinking it; don't *you* worry," retorted Sebastian. "I wonder you haven't started already. Perhaps you have." He sank back in his chair, lower and lower, his legs

stretching under the table. His head was half buried in his shoulders. An expression of deep dejection blackened his face. "Yes," he thoughtfully muttered. "Perhaps you have." Suddenly, in a lower voice, he asked: "Have you?"

Lydia, setting the two vegetable dishes upon the table, and wincing because both were hot, smiled down at him.

"When you're out of sorts, *everything's* awful," she said. "You have your supper before you begin asking questions."

"D'you mean that I'm out of sorts now; or that when *you're* out of sorts—?" demanded Sebastian. "Oh, hell! It's not an answer, either way. And whether I *want* an answer, I'm not sure. Better not. Better to torment oneself with all the unanswered questions in the world. Because an answer's a lie. Any answer to any question *must* be a lie. A kind lie or an angry lie or an unconscious lie or a——"

"Oh, dear!" groaned Lydia. "The beef's tough."

Sebastian, pursing his lips, nodded lugubriously.

"Bound to be," he said. "Everything's tough."

"Or else the knife's blunt," amended Lydia.

"It's the epitome of life," continued Sebastian. "Tough meat and blunt knife. And the impossibility of getting a straight answer to a crooked question. Good God! What a world we live in! All bores, all bored; some snuffing blood from the papers, some snuffing filth from the gutter——"

"And some not taking their plates from their wives," interrupted Lydia, recalling him from pessimism to reality. "And talking a lot of nonsense that shows their liver's out of order."

"I wonder," mused Sebastian, taking his plate, and helping himself to vegetables. "I wonder if you're being wasted. And if you *think* you're being wasted. Whatever you think's probably wrong."

"You'd suppose it didn't matter, then," Lydia said, calmly. "Mustard?"

Sebastian groaned, and pushed the mustard pot back again

to her after helping himself. His feathery head moved from side to side in impotent exasperation.

"As for Mrs. Way," continued Lydia. "I'm sorry for the poor old thing. She's so lonely."

"Everybody is," retorted Sebastian, very shortly.

"I know. Everybody. In a way, I'm sorry for the lot. But I'm more sorry for Dad and Mother and Mrs. Way, because I happen to *know* them," said Lydia. "That's why."

He had not listened to her profound remark. His thoughts had continued along their own line.

"Every Saturday she used to meet him at work and take him home. She knew he was dying. She got a kind of sensation from that, too. *He* knew he was dying. And it's a remarkable thing, Lyd: he wasn't afraid of it. Now *I'm* afraid of it—not eternal punishment, or anything of that sort; but the annihilation. Some men kid themselves they'll live for ever. They think they move up to a higher form—higher class. Snobs! Or they think they'll be absorbed into some spiritual essence. Brahmins! Not I. I sometimes wonder if anything will last of me—in memory, I mean—your memory, even—for a year after my death."

"You're not *well*," Lydia said, falling back upon a slang phrase to express her disquiet. "Besides, it's very ungrateful of you."

"So it is, by God!" exclaimed Sebastian. "I'm not well. I'm depressed—and don't know why. And I throw the burden on you, as usual. Sometimes, when I think of you, I want to call everybody to have a look at a good woman."

"They'd laugh!" said Lydia.

"They'd think I was doting," answered Sebastian. "The fools!"

"Oh, well, you can't please everybody." Lydia remained calm. "Finished?"

She held out her hand for his plate.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE PORCELAIN LADY

I

LYDIA, left alone in the shop while Sebastian attended a sale, was miserable. She had nothing to do all the morning, except think—or read. Even though she propped open the door leading from the shop to the kitchen stairs (as she did for the first hour), it was necessary to strain her ears for a possible bell; and when once her housework was done she sought refuge in Sebastian's lair, protected from dust by a charming blue overall or pinafore, and carrying with her a book of which it was unlikely that she would read more than the opening and closing words.

Age and decay were all about her. These wormy, dirty chairs, and rusted brasses; these mouldering books with the worm-eaten leather covers—how could they produce any effect but that of death and disaster? Ugh, creeps! With a shiver, she opened her book. It was a new novel, in a red cloth cover. Well? Idly she turned the preliminary pages until she came to Chapter I. What large print! Short measure! That was no good! Lydia liked her books long. She frowned. The first words of the book were:

One o'clock. The house was still. A clock upon the mantelpiece ticked briskly . . .

Her eye skipped on:

As he switched on the lights, the newcomer gave a startled cry, and stared down at the floor. There, halfway across the room, lying on his back, his face distorted by a terrible look of fear, lay Ambrose Flack, millionaire. And in his breast was plunged a dagger, the handle of which, curiously wrought . . . while a thin trickle of blood . . .

A faint noise caught his ear . . . Catlike, . . . the room in darkness . . . behind the heavy curtain . . .

A woman's sob. Was there one human being who had loved Ambrose Flack, millionaire? . . . Presently she, too, rose, and with stealthy steps moved to the window. It yielded to her touch. There was a sudden draught of air. Then silence. The watcher . . . The man behind the arras crept out . . . Inspector Turbot, wooden-faced, imperturbable . . .

Lydia pushed the book away, frowning. Silly stuff! It was like all the others. She wasn't interested. She was bored. She drummed with her fingers upon Sebastian's desk. It was cosy in here, and sheltered from draughts. There were several dusty books, in a pile—she spelt out the titles, putting her head sideways in order to read them. Somebody's Sermon; "Holy Dying"; "Michelet's French Revolution"; "Burns's Poetical Works"; "Le Lys dans la Vallée." Lydia grimaced. Nothing here to her taste. Sermons, Death, Revolution, Poetry, and French! All demons! And all unreadable! Her eyes strayed farther. Down by the side of the desk there was an old scuttle, full of odds and ends, small cut-glass bottles and pewter mugs, decanter stoppers and shabby spectacle-cases. What was the good of them? Probably they'd give anybody erysipelas. They smelt nasty enough! Old junk. Sebastian would never throw anything away. The mouldier it was, the more he hugged it. You'd think everything here was like wine, the older the better!

Still idly, she glanced at a folded sheet of blotting paper in which were some letters. Her thumb flicked through these letters, and as it did so a little unmounted photograph showed its face. It was immediately lost. Hullo, what was that? A woman? How the thought quickened her pulse! What, was Sebastian—— Lydia laughed. Painstakingly she went back through the letters, one by one, until she found what she sought. And then she laughed again.

It was a small rough passport photograph of herself, taken

at a time when Sebastian had thought they might fly over to Paris and back as a treat. The proposed flight had come to nothing. They had obtained their passports, and no more. Gradually they had ceased to talk of Paris and of flying. The subject of travel had not been mentioned again until the other night—three years after the taking of the photograph.

"Fancy his keeping that there!" thought Lydia. "What's he doing with it?"

Before replacing the photograph, she examined it closely. Would she have known herself? The features were stiffened with self-consciousness before the camera's round eye; the face looked as if it were dirty; the mass of hair, profuse and overwhelming, made her wince; but of the spirit in those eyes and upon the sharpened lips there could be no question. It impressed her—something startled, almost wild, in the face gave her a shock of dismay at the contrast between such spirit and her present tamer mood of acceptance. Had she been like that?

"Well, I was younger!" protested Lydia, struggling against the weight of her perceptions. "Naturally you change—like the fashions. And the more you change . . . It's the hair. And you always goggle when your photograph's taken. Paris. I wonder where that passport is now. We should *want* them both if we went abroad. Jiminy, I'd like to go abroad! See the world! Never shall! Her head was shaken. No. But all the same, I'll look out that passport. And Sebastian's, too. I believe I know where they are—up in the drawer at the bottom of the wardrobe, under everything. . . ."

She had not moved, but was still looking at the faded little photograph, and musing, when the shop door was opened. Ting, ting, trrring, rang the bell. Gravely, Lydia rose from her chair and stepped out from Sebastian's improvised hutch, her thoughts still occupied with the photograph and the passports and her imagination of what it must be like to cross the sea and find oneself in a strange land where (if her father spoke

truly) there were no words to describe the principal bulwarks of civilization. Dad! She had a quick memory of his gloom, and her heart softened. Poor old soul! A funniosity, but not to be laughed at, because he was so pathetic. Tramping about all day with that bag of stuff was plenty to put bees in your bonnet. Even bats. It was no wonder he took a glass of beer . . . Only with a jerk did she bring herself to attend to this unexpected morning customer.

What did he want, anyway? Something out of the window. Or else to ask where the post-office was. They all wanted to know that. Or to sell her a vacuum cleaner. Or stationery. They seemed to think she spent her days in writing letters. Well! How extraordinary! She had been wrong in all her guesses. The person who had entered the shop was a man, tall and thin, in a long light grey overcoat; and as she moved towards him Lydia recognised, without effort, the young stranger whose confidential conversation with Sebastian she had interrupted a few days previously. He looked different. He was smarter. But he was the same. Lydia felt her spirits rise: she had not supposed that anything so pleasant could possibly happen to her.

II

At sight of her, as she approached, her fair hair catching the sun, and her blue pinafore brightening the shop's darkness, the stranger gave a start. He wrenched off one of his black kid gloves, and stood rather crampedly for a moment. Then, nervously, he came forward with a plunging step, his shoulders swaying, his head set forward. His ungloved hand went to the unusually broad brim of his soft black hat. Strange, gawky movement! "He's shy!" thought Lydia. "He's a child!"

"Good-morning," began the stranger, breathlessly. "I called to see Mr. Rowe about——" A beautiful voice, fastidious and refined; a rather exaggerated way of pronouncing his words.

Art-y. Hampstead. The kind that couldn't forget how cultured it was. He had very high cheek bones, and soft eyes that brimmed with awareness of all the beauty about him. His mouth was large, and it protruded slightly. In speaking, he opened it rather widely. Not a great distance from being ridiculous. And yet, for all her irreverence, Lydia was pleased and touched and made alert by the sight of him. She said, coolly enough:

"He's out this morning. He'll be back after tea. I'm very sorry."

"Oh!" It was a sharp, loud cry of disappointment, such as a little girl gives when her doll topples out of the pram upon a rough piece of road. "Oh, thanks. What a nuisance! I was hoping so much to catch him. Never mind. Never mind. How unfortunate."

There was a childish completeness in his casting down. Although his tone was exaggerated, the expression upon his face matched it. Lydia could not prevent herself at last, under the battery of his strangeness, from smiling. Indeed, she almost laughed.

"Is there anything *I* can do?" she asked. It appeared not. His tone was very decided.

"No. No." He spoke with funny, gasping emphasis, a manner always puzzling to Lydia, who was used to Sebastian's dry murmur and her father's growl. Yet he was not really absurd, as he might have been, or as she might—with ever such slight caricature—have made him. There was something noble about his air, as if he lived remote from the soil, and was courteous (though without condescension) from above. There was a purity, an ingenuousness, a sincere lack of that concern with matters of livelihood which stains the eyes of commoner men. And he was shy. All the time, whether he was speaking or listening, although he looked at her in quick, sweeping glances, he kept his head and his eyes aloof, from shyness. The ungloved

hand was raised to his cheek, to his mouth, at last to his hat, which he nervously removed. "D'you know, I think I . . . When I was here the other day . . ." No, apparently this would not do. He tried again: "I was here the other day, you know."

"I remember, " Lydia said, taking in the mass of golden-brown hair which had been revealed by his action. She was amusedly collected.

"Did he tell you——?" began the young man, expectantly. "I mean——"

"Not a word," answered Lydia, smiling.

How his face fell!

"What a pity! I mean, I wish——" He set his hat down upon a table, so carelessly and so imperfectly that the hat immediately fell to the floor. The young man stooped, and picked it up again, placing it with impatience in a position almost equally precarious. "You see, I'm going away this morning. I'm going into the country; and—— He was showing me something——"

"A porcelain figure," interposed Lydia, quickly. "Yes?" Did she not remember? The vision of the two, and especially of Sebastian's stretched figure, his coat drawn up as he reached towards the shelves, showing the glowing seat of his blue serge trousers, flashed once again before her eyes.

"You remember?" asked the young man, eagerly. "He said he thought it was a genuine piece of Spengler's work. But he wanted rather a lot of money for it, because of that. And I—you see, it doesn't matter, in a sense, I mean, to me, whether it's Spengler or—or *anybody*. Rather an awful thing to say, I expect; but I only wanted it because I happened to think it was beautiful. You see? I mean, a good many of these pieces by celebrated people . . ." He seemed to become aware that he was too loquacious. "I think he was rather horrified with me

for saying so; but——" He shrugged. "We left it, so that he——"

"And did you want to see if my husband had relented?" demanded Lydia. "About the price?"

Again that sweeping glance.

"Well——" The pause was as emphatic as the extravagantly-uttered word. And suddenly he smiled. There had never, in all Lydia's experience, been so lovely a smile. His whole face seemed to be lighted by it, as if he had moved unexpectedly into sunshine. Then, catching his breath, he went on: "Not altogether. Partly. Partly that. But also I was going to ask . . . I mean . . . if I might have the figure kept for me a little while."

He looked so pleading that he could not be denied. The hardest-hearted person in the world must have consented.

"Yes," agreed Lydia, who was far from being the hardest-hearted person in the world. "You may."

"Really? How kind you are!" breathed the young man, in an ecstasy of relief. "How awfully kind!"

"Not me!" she exclaimed, almost brusquely. She was embarrassed by his gratitude. "My husband's kind."

"Both of you, I'm sure," he said, quickly, winningly.

There was a silence between them. Neither moved. Both wished the conversation to continue. It was the young man who first found words.

"I'm very ignorant of this sort of thing." He waved his long hand. "I mean, periods and values, and so on." A little arrogantly, he added: "It doesn't interest me."

"Nor me," agreed Lydia. "But it does my husband."

"Of course." The agreement was merely polite; so that Lydia was stung into explanation.

"He doesn't care about the *money* side of it. *I'm* the one who cares about that."

"Oh . . . I don't believe you care very much," said the young man, archly.

"Yes. A lot. But he doesn't. Though he *ought* to, because it's on the money he makes that we live."

That seemed to be a shock to him. He blinked, frowned, jerked his head. He opened his mouth to say something, and closed it again; so that all Lydia heard was a sort of acquiescent grunt.

"I *know*," said the young man, with extraordinary emphasis. "I know." But he did not know. Lydia could be quite sure that he had never gone hungry, that he had never been bewildered and frightened by an empty pocket, that money had came to him all his life as easily as gas and water came from the taps and burners in Lydia's kitchen. "I hadn't thought of that. Of course it is. I was only thinking of myself, and how I wanted it, and how I couldn't afford it."

He smiled again, as brilliantly, as charmingly, as before; and Lydia's heart softened. But, if her heart softened, her tongue did not. She said, very directly:

"But my husband doesn't think of that, either. In some ways, he's *too* kind. If you can't afford the little thing, and he sees that you feel really bad about it, I expect he'll pretend it's not what he thought it was, and let you have it for nothing."

The young man was horrified.

"But I don't *want* it for nothing," he declared. "I wouldn't *take* it." His cheeks coloured. "I want it very badly, because when I want a thing at all I *do* want it badly. If it weren't for that, you'd frighten me from ever coming here again. However, I shan't *let* you frighten me."

"No, I shouldn't let me frighten you," Lydia responded, drily. "Be a pity. Besides, I might be wrong, mightn't I?"

"I'm sure you're wrong." Charmingly, he added: "I'm telling myself that, to give myself courage. Did you see the figure? It's so beautifully simple. Just the one figure of a shepherdess."

"No, I haven't seen it."

"Are you interested?" He was eager that she should be interested; and Lydia, smiling at his enthusiasm, pretended that she was interested. Perhaps she thought she was? For a moment, under the radiance of that irresistible smile, that ingenuous aesthetic fervour, she could almost have persuaded herself that she had a love for porcelain figures in general.

"You'd like to see it again?" She was sure of it. She went towards the shelves at which Sebastian had been fumbling the other night. There, high above everything else, gleamed something white. "I'll get a pair of steps."

"Oh, it's troubling you," protested the young man. He had been moving restlessly; but he now stopped and faced her. Lydia, smiling again, uncontrollably, saw with amusement the change in his expression. He seemed to be staring at her. His eyes were quite luminous. Just for an instant, those eyes were strongly magnetic, as if, in looking into their depths, one could lose oneself. It was a strange illusion, which Lydia had never previously known. They were beautiful, expressive eyes; and all his movements were expressive, too, of something that might be poetic discontent with whatever was common. She saw him stare, and look away; saw his lips move, and his throat. She took pleasure in the turn of his head, and the mass of golden-brown hair; and stood smiling, waiting for him to speak again.

Then, as he did not speak, she turned away to bring the short pair of steps that stood at the back of the shop. But the young man followed her, and took the steps from her hands, and carried them awkwardly at arm's length back to the spot nearest to the porcelain figure.

"Though I *believe* I could have reached it without the steps," he murmured, mounting.

Lydia watched the reverent way in which he carried the little figure—it was that of a shepherdess in flowing draperies,

no more than four inches high, and extraordinarily graceful —and saw him retreat slowly down the steps to the ground, holding it in both hands.

"There!" she said, archly, as he set it upon the table near his hat, and backed away, his fingers intertwined, his lips pouting, his eyes glowing.

"Beautiful!" ejaculated the young man. "Beautiful!"

He went nearer to the figure, examining it more closely, first from this side and then from that. She had seen Sebastian do very much the same thing, and now, as always, she was conscious of a secret amusement that held no ridicule. Why, this boy was like a child! He was like Sebastian! They were both children, excitable, eaten up with themselves and what they liked, and lovable because they were so innocent. A pair of them!

"There'll be quite a struggle when you come again," murmured Lydia. "For I don't believe my husband will want to part with that. At least, not if you make him see how fascinating it is."

The young man turned, as if bewildered.

"Oh, but I shall *insist!*" he exclaimed. Then his expression became again rueful. "But what if he says it's genuine Spengler!"

"You'll have to ask for the loan of it. Like the Portland Vase. Until you get tired of it," teased Lydia.

"Tired! Never!"

And yet he would tire. Lydia knew it. She was so sure of his tiring that she secretly nodded her head. Look, he was tired already!

The young man, still frowning at the thought that he could ever tire of the porcelain figure, had averted his eyes from her, giving proof, Lydia thought, that he was not used to being teased. Perhaps he was not sure that he liked the experience. Yet he did not go. Instead, he moved abruptly away

to the side of the shop, his head thrown forward, his hands clasped with nervous tightness behind his back. It was a curious attitude, suggesting quick ardour, timidity, and a fluctuating power of self-control. He approached close to a little Chinese carved figure, and Lydia, observing him, realised that he was short-sighted. No wonder his hat had been set down so dangerously! The luminousness of his eyes was explained. Poor boy! He was all nerves!

As she thought this, Lydia became aware that her customer had swung round. So he was artful! Instead of raptly contemplating the porcelain lady, or even the carved Chinese figure, he was now almost furtively examining herself, at length, and with an expression altogether different from any she had previously seen upon his face. So surprised was she that for an instant she was quite helpless, submitting to his gaze as if she were in truth fascinated.

III

"I must go," said the young man, suddenly.

"Would you like to leave your name?"

He was startled again, like a young stag. For an instant he seemed not to have heard what Lydia said. Then, with the same odd breathlessness, as Lydia produced pencil and paper, he said:

"Oh, yes. Of course. My name's Thayer. Got that?—y-e-r . . . Ambrose Thayer. Thank you so much."

Ambrose: how odd! Where had she seen that name? Why, this morning, in the book. Ambrose: It was rather a nice name. Unusual.

"And I'll ask my husband——"

"Would you *mind*? I mean, I . . . Shall I—" He had snatched up his hat, and was holding it close to him with both hands. "Shall I put it back for you?"

He saw that she was about to lift the figure, and it was as though he could not bear that anybody but himself should touch it. Lydia dropped her arms, which had been partly raised.

"It doesn't matter," she murmured. "But if you want——"

"Please. I'd like to." He threw down the hat. It tumbled to the dusty floor, where it lay forlorn. A little puff rose greyly from the spot upon which it had fallen, and Lydia flushed.

"Your hat!" she cried, darting forward. But Ambrose Thayer cared nothing for his hat.

"It doesn't matter. Oh, please!" He had taken the porcelain lady in his hands, and was about to mount the steps. His head was turned to Lydia as she picked up the hat and dusted it with the corner of her pinafore. They stood thus for a moment, Lydia dusting the hat, and the young man looking at her, half across his shoulder. Behind Lydia was the light from the shop window, which caught the outline of her bent head, and gave lustre to the blue pinafore; he, looking down, seemed to lose himself in a dream. Insensibly, the hand in which the porcelain figure was held sank lower and lower. His eyes roamed from Lydia's hair to her white throat; and as she raised her head, conscious at last of that intense gaze, she found him staring as he might have done if he had looked upon the Monna Lisa itself.

"It's all right," Lydia said, lifting the hat.

He was silent. His eyes were withdrawn from her. He inhaled a deep breath. Without speaking, he went a step higher. But he was doing this mechanically, without thinking of his burden; for when he had taken the step he looked down again, and, while he was still watching Lydia, raised his arm, pushed the porcelain figure towards the shelf, relinquished his hold upon it. The precious figure caught the edge of the shelf, slipped, hung in the air, and dropped with a little crack upon the floor. There was a tinkle.

With blanched faces, they exchanged a look of horror. Then both hastened—Lydia to peer under the table beneath which the figure had fallen, Ambrose to step sharply to the ground and to stoop over her.

"God!" exclaimed Ambrose, trembling. "Oh, God! Oh, God!"

Kneeling, Lydia held up the broken pieces. The porcelain lady was in three.

"It's not spoilt," she cried, reassuringly. "It's not spoilt. I can mend it. "You're not to worry about it. I can mend it so that you couldn't tell—— Look, there aren't any chips. Just the clean breaks. Isn't that lucky!" She smiled at Ambrose, set the pieces upon the table, held them together. It could be seen, as she had said, that the breaks were clean, and that when it was thus held together the figure was as charming as ever. "D'you see?" she asked, in triumph.

But Ambrose was not looking at the porcelain lady. He was standing with his eyes shut, hearing again that terrible sound of the tinkling porcelain. He seemed to be shivering.

"You mustn't worry about it!" repeated Lydia. "You won't, will you!" she pleaded. "It would be so silly——"

He found his voice, but only a whisper.

"It's broken," he said. "What will you think of me! I wasn't thinking. I——"

"You suddenly remembered your train," suggested Lydia, with a faint smile.

He mechanically looked at his watch.

"Yes," he murmured. "Yes, that must have been it. I wasn't thinking of what I was doing. How clumsy! How idiotic!" He replaced his watch, and stretched out his hands for the fragments. His long thin fingers touched Lydia's as he took the figure. They were like ice.

"When you come again," said Lydia, "you won't be able to tell she's been broken." And as he ignored her words, his

face still distorted with pain and horror, she added, "Really, you won't."

She might as well have remained silent—it appeared—for he took no notice. At last:

"Is that true?" He was incredulous. "You're saying that to——"

"No I'm not. Come and see."

"May I?" His glowing eyes looked into hers. He gave back the three pieces into her hands. "I can't tell you——" To Lydia's surprise he grew violently red. Something like a sob forced its way to his lips. Catching up his hat, he seemed to be filled with a desire to say something more, something that was difficult—impossible to utter. His breath came quickly; his lips parted again and again. But no words were spoken.

"Don't forget," murmured Lydia. There was not the smallest coquettishness in her glance; but it was kind.

"You're—you're——"

Stammering, he fairly ran to the door, where he put on his hat with a convulsive movement, and seized the handle, dragging at it while the catch was still checked.

"Hope you get your train all right," Lydia called after him.

"All right," she heard. It sounded like an echo of her own speech. Then the bell drowned everything else; the door crashed and shuddered as it struck violently against his foot; the grey overcoat gave a whirl; and he was gone. Over the partition separating the shop from the window-display, Lydia saw the top of his black hat flying past as he fled along the street; and then, quite roused to laughter by so odd a scene (for all her concern at the accident to the shepherdess), she turned back towards Sebastian's lair, carrying the fragments of porcelain pressed gently to her bosom. *What* a boy!

CHAPTER FIVE: MAKING FRIENDS

I

WITHIN a week Ambrose was again in the shop; and by chance Lydia was once more in charge for the day. She had guessed that he would come. In fact, knowing beforehand that Sebastian would be absent, she had risen in the morning with a faint sense of expectation. That was the first time she had ever looked forward with pleasure to her turn of sentry-go. Hitherto, her one favourite among those customers who were regular enough visitors to be recognisable had been a Mr. Parsons, an old man with a rosy, bony, shiny nose, and a white beard of great length. Mr. Parsons stooped over everything, and his finger-nails were flat and yellow, and he smelt of musk, and he wore crimson mittens. He was a collector who had been accumulating treasures for fifty years, and whose collection would be dispersed for a trifle at his death by a sister who regarded it as rubbish. Ambrose Thayer was different. He was amusing; he interested her. And as she hurried over her housework, and at last took her place in Sebastian's lair, Lydia had but one thought: would he come?

He came. She saw him before the door-bell rang, having recognised the peculiar wavy movement of his hat above the window-partition. When the door was subsequently thrust back, so that it crashed, as a result of one of those short-sighted, convulsive gestures which were so characteristic of him, she gave in secret a short, dry laugh. Before her, in the lair, stood the porcelain figure of the shepherdess, wonderfully mended by her own quick hands, so that only close examination revealed the cracks occasioned by that unlucky fall. Lydia glanced at the figure, lifted it, gently slipped it into the pocket of her overall, holding it there so that no sharp movement should endanger the repair. Then, deliberately keeping him waiting, she watched the nervous glance he cast down the shop,

his plunging step across to the shelves upon which forty or fifty books were ranged, and the play of his hands, as they were poised, as they hovered, as they dropped to his sides. Only when he began to walk loudly about, for the purpose of attracting attention, did she move forward.

"Morning," Lydia called, briskly. "You're early."

He started. She saw him smile. He came marching towards her as if he purposed shaking hands. But at a short distance he stopped. Awkwardness seized his limbs. One could have imagined that he had reached a magic line beyond which he was prevented from passing.

"Good-morning," stammered Ambrose. "How d'you do."

The impulse to tease him rose in Lydia. She would say nothing of the shepherdess. She would make him refer to it first. Keep him on tenterhooks! It would be funny to watch him hesitating, and then to hear him gasp out. No; that would be cruel. Horrid. She would not do it. She would——

Without meaning to do any such thing, she went quite close to Ambrose, took the figure from the pocket of her blue overall, and held it up—to the superficial glance unscathed. Her reward lay in the sudden catching of his breath.

"Beautiful!" he exclaimed. His long fingers were extended, hovering above her own. "Beautiful!"

She was to hear the word many times in the days that followed, pronounced always as if he were in ecstasy; and whenever she heard the word she was to be touched and amused—and sometimes exasperated by its application.

"It's yours," said Lydia.

"Mine?"

She nodded, studying the play of joy, incredulity, suspicion upon those mobile features.

"My husband says you're to pay for it when you can afford it. And I'm to tell you that the price will be exactly half-a-guinea. Ten and sixpence."

The shock was so great that he nearly dropped the shepherdess. Then, resolutely, he set the figure down.

"No," said he. "I won't take it. No, no, no." His face flushed; he was wounded. "No, I couldn't take it. It's worth so much more than that—even though I broke it."

Lydia's heart fluttered with distress at such childish disappointment.

"Oh, but you mustn't spoil it," she protested, warmly. "Really, you mustn't. It's not a present, you know. What? No it isn't. It's business. Well, then, I shall think you don't want it any more. Yes, that's it. Youre tired of it. I always said you'd get tired of it, didn't I?"

She set the porcelain lady down, and stood regarding Ambrose, whose serious face was dark with emotion. She did not know how the cajolery of her speech had been supported by the cajolery of her manner, how eagerness had given vivid bloom to her cheeks, and how, in her blue overall, she challenged the figure itself in charm. At least, she did not realise it until she saw that Ambrose was beginning to look less deeply wounded, and then (by the effort of resistance) even more extravagantly displeased; and how his brow cleared, and his lips trembled, and he turned away with an abruptness that showed a weakened resistance. She heard him murmur something, saw him put his hand to his pocket, draw it away, frown again.

"Very well," said Ambrose. "I'll take the figure." He tried to speak sternly. "But I shall come and see your husband about it. When will he be home, please?"

Such coldness! He was spoilt! He was sensitive and spoilt—a tyrant. Lydia did not speak. She stood looking at him, trying not to laugh, wearing a comical expression of concern. In vain did Ambrose frown. He was displeased with her, convicted of childishness. Lydia guessed that in this moment of

conflict he hated her. Well, she would tease no longer. It wasn't fair to him. And yet—how enjoyable!

"He'll be home this evening. And you can come and see him whenever you like. I'm not going to say any more. You shall take it or not, just as you like," she said. "Only, you see, we didn't think you'd be angry about it. We thought you'd be pleased."

At first she thought Ambrose had been still further offended by her speech. It was not so. He turned from her, it was true; and appeared to be upon the point of going; but at last his whole face lightened. He smiled. He recovered, with the most graceful air of contrition.

"How kind you are!" he exclaimed. "And how obstinate you make me feel! Of course I shall be delighted to take it. Thank you."

That was all. He took the figure. A moment later, he was gone.

II

That was the beginning. Subsequently Ambrose *did* return, more than once. He struck up a sort of friendship with Sebastian. He came once or twice in the mornings; Lydia saw him once in the afternoon, stooping over a table, and then bringing his short-sighted eyes close to some shelves, picking up small objects with his long, delicate fingers. Upon another day, when she was alone, he called, took hardly any notice of her, and moved about the shop at his own whim, finally leaving with hardly an acknowledgment of Lydia's presence. Upon a third occasion, she had drawn his attention—because she liked it herself—to a small water-colour of some young larches; and Ambrose had dropped the water-colour as if it burned his fingers.

"All *right*," thought Lydia. She would not again show him anything she liked. She was not asking for snubs from children,

thank you! Besides, he wasn't polite. He was too shy, conceited, and brusque to be polite. His glance had scarcely rested upon her water-colour, but had flown off into impatient search of the horizons for something less intolerable. An impatience similar to his own—but impatience spiced with the resentment of the consciously ignorant—arose in Lydia's bosom. Who was this boy, to disdain something that pleased her? Who *was* he? What did *he* know? Why was *he* to behave as if he owned the world? She lifted her chin, and began to retreat to Sebastian's lair.

"I say!" called Ambrose. "*This* is beautiful!"

Lydia thought "this" very ugly—even horrible. It was a roughly carved wooden doll, the work of somebody with the mind of earliest man. But she did not say that she thought the doll ugly. She did not copy Ambrose's indifference to the æsthetic taste of others, but stood, smiling, until he set down the doll and moved to something else. Beautiful, was it! The smile deepened. The way he said "beautiful"! She thought he would get into heaven by saying "beautiful" in that rapt tone to St. Peter, or whoever it was who put you through your first examination at the gates. "Beautiful!" In secret, she mocked him, trying to catch the curious up-throwing of the head which accompanied the word. "Beautiful!"

Well, what *was* beautiful? Lydia could not discover. Was it an old slipper? A silver dish? Some grotesque Chinese ivory fisherman? Some vase or pot that caused Ambrose to lift his hands and move them fastidiously through the air, as if he were in imagination creating the vase or the pot afresh? This boy puzzled her. She could not make him out. He was like no other boy she had ever met. Perhaps that wasn't saying much. She had not known many boys. There had been a few during her girlhood; but she could hardly remember their faces now, or their Christian names. There had been Hubert Vanstone, when she had been at the Vanstones, and for Hubert she pre-

served some interest. He had been kinder to her than the others. She had met him by chance upon two or three occasions, during walks, and he had not shunned her. Quite the contrary. Lydia still thought of him as a nice boy. His friend, Peter (no surname), she had not liked as much. He had looked at her funnily. And after her marriage to Sebastian one or two men had tried to scrape acquaintance; one or two others had come into the shop, intent upon purchases; and the rest of her knowledge had been obtained by observation of strangers, long guesses, many remarkable intuitions or instinctive likings and dislikings. Ambrose was completely new ground.

What was his mother like? Had he got any sisters? Lydia shook her head. No; he'd got no brothers or sisters. If he had had either, he would not have been such a tyrant. But his mother, now——

All this time, Ambrose had been stooping over some miscellaneous bric-à-brac in the far corner of the shop. But he had now left the bric-à-brac and was holding close to his eyes a very small oil painting in a thin, oval frame. Suddenly he called to Lydia.

"I say!" he cried, vehemently. "I can't stand this thing. Hide it! It's obscene. Foul!"

Lydia hastened to save the picture from being cast among the china.

"Why, what's the matter with it?" she demanded. "I don't see as it's anything worse than usual."

"I hate it!" cried Ambrose. "It reminds me——" He did not finish his sentence, but strode across the shop, leaving Lydia holding the picture half-extended in one hand. It represented a rather Greuze-like subject, a girl wearing a sunbonnet and caressing some kind of small bird. The artist had not been sure what kind of bird.

"It doesn't remind *me* of anything," Lydia protested. "What d'you mean?"

"Oh, never mind," came wearily from the other side of the shop. "Nothing you know about."

Thinking the matter closed, Lydia set down the picture in its old position upon a table, behind some cups and saucers. She was moving away, when Ambrose, still at a distance, continued:

"It reminds me of something personal. Well, not personal."

"No," said Lydia, vaguely. "I see."

Ambrose turned about. He took two long strides, and stood before her. Lydia had a glimpse of his narrow height, the marble-like face, the glowing eyes, and the mass of fair hair.

"You *don't* see," he asserted.

"Of *course* I don't," agreed Lydia, calmly. "Why should I?"

"Well, you said you did. That's what I *mean!*"

They stood looking at each other until Lydia could keep serious no longer. She relaxed, laughing.

"Don't you see, I was just sort of politely saying nothing," she asked. "I mean, you say the picture's foul, when it's only silly. Or perhaps it's us that's silly. And so then——"

"Well, I expect you—oh!" Ambrose abandoned his speech, and frowned the rest of his meaning.

"Got to be polite, you know," urged Lydia. "In business."

"I don't see why."

"No, I've noticed." She was quite ready to be cheeky to him.

"D'you mean I'm rude?" demanded Ambrose. "Do you?"

Lydia shook her head. There seemed to be a good deal of excitement in his manner, for which she was unprepared.

"You don't *mean* to be," she said.

"But I *am*. Is that it? Why, do you know that I'm—— However, we won't talk about that. I'm going to tell you why I felt like pitching that thing through the window. But first I must tell you that I'm getting most awfully careful to be

polite to all. To *everybody*. One must, you know. Now, my *father*——"

"Father." Lydia repeated the word under her breath, brightening.

"He's *not* polite. He's an old barrister. He's been at the Criminal Bar for thirty years. He's used to cross-examining witnesses; and at home we're all, apparently, on the other side. Sometimes I simply can't stand his manner. It's merely insulting. But he doesn't realise that."

"I've always wondered about your father and mother," Lydia interjected. "I was wondering a minute ago."

"It's of my mother that that picture reminds me."

"Ah!"

"She's dead. She died a year ago. Very fond of little birds. She had dozens in cages all over the house, crowded with birds. Dozens of them."

"What an odd idea!" exclaimed Lydia, greatly interested.

"Have *you* got any birds in cages?" asked Ambrose.

"Not one. Don't like 'em," she answered him. The frown became malignant.

"You see what I mean, then."

"But there isn't a cage in the picture," declared Lydia, innocently. "I think the bird's a dove."

His glance was venomous.

"I'm not talking about *that*," he said. "I'm talking about all sorts of other things."

"Not clearly, then," answered Lydia, with courage. "Because I haven't understood a word you were saying."

"You *have!*" Ambrose was terribly indignant.

"No."

At her shaken head, he stared afresh, made a little sound with his tongue, and turned away. His long steps carried him right to the door of the shop, the handle of which he vehemently seized.

"Your hat!" cried Lydia, darting forward. And then: "Don't go!" Ambrose did not hear. He was almost gone. Too late to bring him back! "Your *hat!*" called Lydia. She ran to the door, carrying the broad-brimmed black hat. Ambrose, several paces along the street, heard her call, stopped, plunged back, took the hat from her hand without a word of thanks, crammed it fiercely upon his head, and again strode away.

Lydia, with the din of the alarm bell at the top of the door throbbing continuously in her head, hastened back into the shop. As the door was slammed the bell ceased to ring, and in the echoing silence she shivered. Disturbing. He'd looked—— Memory of that expression of arrogance wounded her. But at the episode of the hat she laughed to herself until the tears gathered in her eyes.

"What a sketch he'd have looked!" she exclaimed aloud. "Tearing through the streets like that! And what on earth was he driving at? The poor lad's——"

She did not say what she thought he was.

III

A week passed. Upon the last day of it Sebastian was out during the afternoon, and Lydia minded the shop. Mr. Parsons, with his cherry-tinted nose and a habit of reaching one finger down the back of his neck in order to scratch a mysterious tickle, called about four o'clock. Ambrose had not been. Something caused Lydia, who had been watching the door, and the way in which the westering sun made deposited dust more than ordinarily hideous, to move forward and draw out the little picture of the lady with the bird.

"Charming," cooed Mr. Parsons, carrying the picture to the light. "Charming. And what a soulful eye she has."

"Which one do you mean?" asked Lydia, following Mr. Parsons, and peeping over his shoulder. "She's got two."

"The larger one. It seems to be at right angles to the other. It reminds me of an oyster. Quite delicious. But the hand—not quite fashionable nowadays, they tell me, to have dimples in the knuckles! And the dear little bird. What a long beak it has. The dove with the eagle's beak—I fancy there was a novel by Charlotte Yonge called 'The Dove with the Eagle's Beak.' This must be a portrait of the very bird. How strange!" He abruptly thrust the picture back into Lydia's hands. "Here, take it!" he cried, in a different tone. "It is an exceedingly bad little painting. One of the worst I have ever seen—outside Student's Day at the National Gallery. The others have all been larger."

"Does it disgust you?" asked Lydia.

"Disgust? Nothing disgusts me," answered Mr. Parsons. "No, it bores me, I think."

"I only wondered," Lydia told him. "I'm curious about that picture."

"It shows bad taste," said Mr. Parsons, "to be curious about that picture."

"Yes, well, I'm unlucky," Lydia replied.

"You've discouraged me," continued Mr. Parsons. "I was as happy as a grig, and now I shall go home, discouraged. *There's* something for your conscience! But I shall come again. Even bad pictures can't discourage me for ever; and if you aren't a *perfect* picture, I don't know one when I see it. Why, you're worth a thousand of that oyster-eyed creature with the eagle-dove. Believe me! Good-afternoon, my dear!"

He went off, chuckling with almost senile self-satisfaction at his own humour; while Lydia, having received no enlightenment, followed his progress with her eyes, though without moving from where she stood. She might, from her attitude, have been reflecting upon his criticism. Or digesting his flattery. But after a time she began to walk restlessly about the shop, which was an activity not altogether easy to indulge,

owing to the multitude of articles heaped and jostled together upon the floor and upon every hand.

The dust seemed to be particularly heavy this afternoon, making her nostrils smart and causing her throat to feel contracted. Something, too, made her heart feel as if it had turned to water in her breast. Out of doors the sunshine glittered, cruelly revealing the dirt and dust and shabby greyness of everything that fell under its beams. Lydia could see the big vans and the omnibuses as they went towering and rumbling by quite close to the shop window, as though they *must* sooner or later sway over and fall among the treasures cunningly displayed there by Sebastian. As a rule this sight, and the imagination of what might happen, diverted her, as moving objects divert the otherwise comatose minds of babies and cats; but this afternoon movement did not avail. She was oppressed by a sense of dust and dirt, of the stifling, lifeless atmosphere, of routine, of the dreariness of all these silent old pots and pans under the drab ceiling. They were not so bad in the Winter; but now——

What was the good of a life that was spent, mole-like, in the darkness? She felt that she was stupid; and her heart, already so strangely soft and heavy, seemed to sink yet lower. What was the good of a stupid woman? She was only good for scrubbing floors and making beds and scouring greasy pans. Nothing more . . .

The bell of the shop-door rang sharply, and a man entered. For an instant Lydia, half-blinded by the sun, felt her heart rise; but for an instant only. From feeling startled, excited, she slipped unawares into unenthralled, accepting pleasure. The newcomer was Sebastian. Sebastian in an old thin grey overcoat, his shabby brown hat pulled over his eyes. He looked like a hawker who would offer ferns in exchange for old boots. But it was so amusing to see him that Lydia's heart softened.

"My God!" Sebastian said, smiling in an almost imp-like

manner, and keeping on his hat, although he struggled out of his overcoat. "My God! How good it is to be home again!"

"Isn't it stale and stuffy in here?" Lydia asked. "Feels awfully close, to me."

"Paradise!" declared Sebastian, with his faint joviality. "Absolute Paradise!"

"What a taste you've got!" grumbled Lydia. "Paradise, indeed! More like Jericho, I should have thought."

"And here's Adam and Eve!" cried Sebastian, ignoring her dryness, and kissing her upon the ear. "Adam and Eve without the Serpent." He at last took off his hat and threw it along to the table half-hidden by that protective rug which formed his lair. He had come home happy.

IV

The next day was Saturday; and Lydia, who knew that the Parliament Hill Fields would be crowded all the afternoon with sportsmen and sightseers, making all together a gallant stir for the eye, decided that she would go thither, glance at some of the extremely serious cricketers, and hurry home again in good time to prepare Sebastian's favourite meal—tea. Although she was free from the grosser misconceptions, such as that the two batsmen were opposed to one another, or that left-handed players were necessarily discreditable *jeux d'esprit* upon the part of their captains, she did not understand the game of cricket. What amused her in the game as it was played upon these public fields was that with so many matches in progress at one time each of them was constantly being interrupted by fieldsmen from other, and neighbouring, matches rushing perilously after flying cricket balls. They ran so fast, their caps flying off, and the cracking noise made by the contact of bat and ball was so exciting, that Lydia never tired of passing along the boundaries and glancing at the sport. She could not

share the seriousness of the players; but their seriousness made the half of her delight.

It was as she had known it would be. Beneath a grey-blue, cloudless sky, the green grass was dotted with white figures—a perfect maze of them. Little groups of men and youths, some in white flannels and brilliant caps, others only partially dressed for cricket, with braces over their white shirts and black socks showing above white shoes, were gathered together around the scorers. They called out to their batsmen: "Run, run!" or "No, no, no! Go back! Go back!" What frenzy they all showed! And all because of a trick piece of wood and a leathern ball! She had noticed that a ball was essential to almost every game which men played together. Football, cricket, lacrosse, hockey, bowls, billiards—in every case one either struck a ball with a stick or threw it or kicked it. Men were funny. They were *all* funny. And how unconscious of their funniness! Serious and funny. Women were not in the least funny. Poor things!

Once a ball came across the grass directly towards her. She was tempted to pick it up and throw it towards a fieldsman who pursued with desperation, with fanatic zeal. But a thousand voices seemed to cry, "Let it alone! Let it alone! She saw the ball roll on to the footpath, saw the unfortunate little cricketer, a tiny man with a black bullet head, who was all curves, go sprawling on to the gravel, hurting his hands and chin. But he picked himself up, as if by magic, seized the ball, flung it violently through the air, and pantingly began to run back—as rapidly as ever, with his loins working—in the direction from which he had come, quite heedless of the blood that trickled from his chin. Lydia heard the great gasping grunt he gave in throwing the ball with all his might. Heard also a distant cry of "Heads! Heads! Mind your heads!" and saw, far away, two little figures running ecstatically to and fro between the

wickets. She turned away, laughing at the spirit of this bantam, and at memory of those distant figures. What a world!

And as she turned, she walked straight into Ambrose Thayer, who had been watching the same incident, as blind to others as she had been, and who had begun to walk again just as she had done, but in the opposite direction. Upon Ambrose's face was no smile of amusement, but a look—a rather gloomy look—of abstraction. But he smiled when Lydia bumped against him. She, jumping back, glanced eagerly upward, and at the smile felt a relief which caused her to draw quick breath.

"Hullo!" cried Lydia. "You here?"

"Hullo! I might say the same to you," he answered, in high spirits. The gloom had disappeared from his expression. He was arch, winning, and filled with that exaggeration of courtesy which would have been regarded as almost certainly insincere by social novices.

"Yes, but you didn't," teased Lydia. "Have you been away? No? Then where *have* you been? I've been expecting you to come in any day." She did not know that her eyes shone; she only knew that Ambrose, his eyes glowing and his lips parted, was gazing away, across to the tortured figures in white who sported against a green background.

"I don't know," mumbled Ambrose. "I've been rather busy."

"Seems odd!" Lydia could not restrain that impudence. "I've never thought of you—somehow—as doing any work."

Ambrose flushed, and looked very uncomfortable, as if he could not meet her eye. Lydia thought: He doesn't want to see me. I'm all right in the shop; but out of it—I'm not his sort. He's sorry we met here. He's fidgetting to get away. Poor boy! How hot it was! The sun was broiling. It made her heart beat: she was going to get red in the face!

"Well, you come in one day, and tell me what you've been doing. I'm going for a walk, now, to get some fresh air." She was leaving him, with a brisk nod. "Good-bye."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Ambrose, almost pathetically. He raised his hand, as if to intercept her. Such a curious gesture. Well? "Please! I mean, may I walk a little way——?"

"Really?" Her heart had jumped. This was delight! She'd been wrong! Breathless, she asked him: "Do you want to? Don't be just polite."

In another minute, they were walking slowly along the path together, silent, as if confused. The sharp echoes of bat and ball, the clapping hands, the anxious cries of spectators, mingled together into a distant harmony. The sun glittered everywhere, blindingly. Other walkers, watching the cricket as they went, or hurrying, or merely clumsy in movement, occasionally jostled them. Lydia heard a young man who was passing say to his companion, another young man: "Well, I mean, a *lady* doesn't spit on your cap, does she!" She did not hear the answer. But she felt so frivolous, now, with unexpected happiness, that she felt inclined to retort: "Depends on what you *call* a lady, old son!"

As much with the object of chaining this unruliness of the mind, as of forcing Ambrose to speak, Lydia struggled hard to find some conversational opening. What more natural than a subdued inquiry after his health?

"Have you been quite well?" she asked. She saw very close at hand the white cheek, the delicately moulded ear, the fine gold of his hair at the temples, upon which the sun glanced. "Beautiful!" said something mischievous within her. With difficulty, laughter was suppressed. It danced in her eyes, and trembled upon her eager lips; but her voice was not otherwise than easy and tender.

"No." Ambrose spoke hurriedly. She heard him cough slightly, as if from nervousness. "Not very well. I suffer from headaches—oh, fabulous, maddening headaches! This heat . . . and—" again he flushed—"I've really—I mean, I know it sounds absurd to you (you've said so); but I've been working

very hard; and that always upsets me rather. It makes me—— How have *you* been? And your husband? I must come in and see him. I expect he's had thousands of things—— But I've—really, I've been so tired and confused that I've hardly known what I was doing. And then I——"

That was as far as he could go. The rest choked him.

"What, something else?" prompted Lydia, skirting a little girl's doll perambulator.

"Nothing else," he retorted.

She was puzzled.

"Oh, I thought you began to say——"

"I did; but then I decided—not to. You see I felt that I should like to tell you something. Then I felt I couldn't. Now, shall I? Well, the fact is——" He struggled for a moment to speak, crimsoned, and at last exclaimed: "Oh, God, I *can't!*"

As he did this he plunged away with uncontrollable nervous movements.

"All right," said Lydia, quickly. "I see. Never mind." In a lowed tone, she added: "Only I'm curious, I'll admit."

He was back at her side, but he was walking with agitated, uneven steps, obviously in a state of considerable perplexity. Lydia felt that he might actually be blowing the puffball of a dandelion, to decide whether or not he should proceed. In reality he must have been fighting an inhibition, as the stammerer fights a stammer.

"The fact is," he continued, firmly, "I felt . . . I mean, I had the feeling that you might think I behaved rather absurdly when I saw you last." It was very frank, and he pronounced the words very fastidiously, with less than the usual exaggeration of tone. At the same time he was looking directly ahead, so that Lydia, although she was watching his lips, was compelled to guess at part of the speech. "I *was* absurd; and I knew it. That made it worse. I'm often absurd. I pay for it afterwards by being very much ashamed . . ."

He stopped. His lips were pale. If he paid afterwards for every absurdity, he would certainly pay for this unusual candour, not because it was absurd, but because it was the breaking down of a barrier between them. He was delivering himself into Lydia's hands. Would he, thereafter, begin to dislike her? It was possible. As if knowing this, although she did not know it, Lydia kept silent. She was grave now. A wrong word, like a noisy step, and she would miss something that was necessary to her. He would be "upset" again, as he had been that other day. But she was nearer to his heart than she had yet been; so near that at any moment, suddenly alarmed, his pride might carry him off for ever. Lydia knew it now—quite unquestioningly. She might never see him again. And she was curious, curious. She wanted to know more—all that he could tell her. Why, this was a man's heart! She had never seen such a thing before. Breathing rapidly, her brain alert, ready to scamper in whatever direction his speech might demand, she tiptoed beside him.

"It's difficult to explain," Ambrose was stammering.

"Well, it's difficult to talk, out-of-doors, and in a crowd," Lydia answered. She mustn't frighten him. She must show that she understood, and that she wasn't going to worry him for more than he was ready to tell. "And there's a row, too. But there's no need to explain. I didn't think—I mean, about being absurd . . . I can understand all sorts of things without explaining."

"I wonder if you can." His voice was low; he shot a swift, doubtful glance. She was safe, so far: there was no chilling. "A great many things, of course. Not this. You couldn't understand it, because you haven't got the facts. And you haven't got the fears," he added, under his breath.

Lydia caught at the last words. What fears?

"What are you afraid of?" she asked, in a low tone.

"A hundred things. Myself, my father——" There had been

something else: was it a sigh? Was it "you"? Was it—— Lydia waited for him to proceed; but he was walking along, staring at the path, quite unconscious of the direction in which they were going.

What was Lydia to say? Nothing? But if she said nothing, he might think that she did not care to hear more; and the occasion might pass——

"It sounds mysterious," she murmured. "Only I can't think what you've got to be afraid of. You're not *poor*."

"Oh, as if poverty was the only thing——" He was impatient with her. "You think that's the only thing to hear. Good God! It's nothing. What on *earth* does poverty matter?"

"All right," thought Lydia. "You try it, my lad. You don't know what it *is* to be afraid!" Aloud, she said: "Well, I'm stupid, then. Sorry."

"You're not at all stupid," persisted Ambrose, regarding her with a sort of glowing humbleness. With a sweeping change, he added: "And you *know* you're not. It's such *nonsense*—— But you remember what I said to you about my mother——"

"And the birdcages? Yes, I do."

"And my father?"

"Do you mean about his rudeness?" asked Lydia, with some hesitation.

Ambrose bent his head in acquiescence.

"You see?" he demanded.

Lydia did not see.

"I wish I did," she told him, frankly. "But it's no good me pretending, is it?"

"Oh, dear!" His face fell. But he did not grow impatient, as she had feared he would do. Rather, he checked some impetuosity of thought, stooped towards her, and began, as a little boy at school might explain to his sister, not yet at school, regarding the creation of the world: "I mean . . .

you see, I mean that sometimes I think it accounts for things in me—beastly things——"

"No."

"Well, perhaps inexcusable things. I had such a rotten childhood——"

"Must have," agreed Lydia, imagining her own.

"Oh, *rotten. Perfectly* rotten. When I think of it——"

"Makes you sorry for yourself," guessed Lydia.

"No, no! *I'm* not sorry for myself," said Ambrose, hastily.

"All right," answered Lydia. "You're not. Why should you be? It's not as if you were a cripple, or starving——"

She did not complete her sentence. Nor did Ambrose wait for her to do so. He interrupted:

"No, I'm not sorry; but I do sometimes feel that I ought to apologise for myself. I ought to be able to hand my friends —at the beginning, you know—a little list of explanations of my bad behaviour."

"Oh, your friends," murmured Lydia. "They don't need any lists. They make tneir own. It's more fun."

"Do they *really* make the lists?" asked Ambrose, earnestly. "Long ones?"

"No, not long ones."

"What do they say? *Do* tell me!"

"They say, 'He's him,' " said Lydia.

Ambrose gave a shout of laughter. He half plunged away from her; then he returned, his whole face shining with laughter and happiness.

"Do they really?" he begged. "How marvellous of them! How marvellous!"

"Well, they *are* marvellous!" answered Lydia, coolly. "What else did you think?"

She too was happy, light-hearted, merry; as if the sun were filling her heart and making it buoyantly carefree.

V

The sound of dogs barking made the two of them aware that they were approaching a pond. By this time the cricketers were all far behind, and Lydia and Ambrose were in a different world. Dogs were rushing to the edge of a sheet of water, and Saturday afternoon strollers (such as themselves, were idly regarding the scene. Here were clerks with bowler hats, and smart young women; other women less smart, accompanied by men in caps and rough clothes; other men who were no more than youths, either grouped together or in company with loudly laughing girls; and finally a few stranded exhibits clothed in all the futile ugliness of plus fours. Lydia's upper lip gave a slight twitch of disdain.

"Smarties," she said. "Why can't they dress prop'ly?"

For the first time, she took deliberate note of the suit which Ambrose was wearing. It was of fine grey cloth, very well cut, and free from that odious pretentiousness which makes the average young intellectual about town. Ambrose's manner of dressing had pleased Lydia from the beginning. He dressed fastidiously, but not with the object of drawing attention to his own singularity. For one so careless as he was in other matters, this seemed strange. But it was pleasant. In new clothes, Sebastian always looked "dressed up" and uncomfortable. In old ones he looked like a down and out. Ambrose was different.

"You could tell me, if you liked," she said, "about the bird-cages. But not if you don't want to."

"I've told you," Ambrose answered, with manner. "The rest you have to imagine."

"Ah, I'm not so good at that, p'r'aps," murmured Lydia. "All right, I'll try."

"You'd be good at *anything*," she heard with delighted amazement. Ambrose turned upon her in a state, it appeared,

of ardour. "If you tried, I mean. You *must* know it. You must have been told of it. I mean, it's so *obvious*." The over-emphatic accent upon different words was characteristic of him; and although Lydia smiled she was touched and impressed by his evident admiration. "Surely you've been told!" insisted Ambrose, all eyes.

"As you're so sure of it, you don't need me to tell you," said Lydia, calmly.

"But your husband——"

What did he mean? He was looking at her with a glance of lightning.

"I'm used to him," Lydia answered, smiling again. "P'r'aps he's used to me, too. When you're used to a person, you don't get dazzled the same as a stranger would."

Ambrose turned away. For a moment his manner was constrained.

"I'm not *dazzled*," he muttered, like a boy.

It was at this moment, as they loitered by the pond, that Lydia caught sight of the dark stranger who had pulled her out of the way of the motor. She hesitated to think "saved her life," but such a notion did just hover within range of thought. He was standing with his back to the water, leaning against a railing, dressed again in a dark suit, with a hard felt hat which cut off his forehead and gave a look of breadth to his olive face. And he was regarding her steadily with the same cool, shrewd, and penetrating gaze as ever. As she glanced at him, the stranger straightened his body and raised his hat respectfully enough; but as his eyes rested upon Ambrose the faintest of smiles crossed his face. It was instantly gone, but not before it had been seen by both Lydia and Ambrose. Memory of their brief conversation in the darkness, and her conviction that the stranger had followed her home, rushed into Lydia's mind, warming her cheeks and causing her to raise her head as she bowed slightly to the stranger. And this fact also was seen by

Ambrose, who, in acknowledging the stranger's salute, had looked quickly from one to the other.

"D'you know that fellow?" Ambrose asked.

"Who, the dark man? No," said Lydia. "Not really."

"I thought he seemed a bit impudent."

"I don't think he means to be," she answered. "He was in a restaurant one night when we were there." She did not speak of the averted accident. Why not? There were several reasons. One of them was that she had said nothing of the incident to Sebastian.

Ambrose was a little flushed.

"I didn't like the look of him," he said, in a low voice.

"Didn't you? I shouldn't trouble about him." Lydia said no more about the stranger. "I must just look at the time," she added. "I've got to be home to get my husband's tea."

"Oh!" It was a disappointed cry. "I was hoping we could have tea together. Can't we?"

What a boy! It was easy to see that, whatever his mother might have done with the birdcages, he had never been crossed. Lydia shook her head.

"No, we can't," she firmly replied. "Because that man loves his tea better than anything else in the world. He has three cups, and about a dozen cakes and things. Oh, dear! It's late. I must go back!"

"May I come with you?"

They made their way back along the path, and once more struggled through the crowds gathered about the pond.

"Like Venice," Lydia said, pointing to the houses which came down to the water's edge.

"Not in the least," responded Ambrose.

As he spoke, his face changed. Lydia, sensitive now to everything, knew that he had again seen the dark stranger, and that the stranger had again smiled provokingly. She kept her eyes averted until she was sure they must be past. Then, with

relief, she relaxed. Ambrose had been looking down at her all the time, watching her face.

"That fellow——" he began. "Did you see him grin? I've a good mind——"

"Don't be silly!" commanded Lydia, in a fright. "Come along!"

"I can't *stand*——"

"Come *along*. Why, what an Irishman you are!" she cried. For the first time, she laid a hand upon his arm. Then she started. What was this? It seemed to her that Ambrose was trembling. Trembling—why? His cheeks were certainly flushed with anger, and his lips were parted. His eyes were dark and suspicious. Agitation rose in Lydia. She too trembled. But her voice was calm. "After all, what does it matter of anybody stares? There's men all over the place who stare as if they were mad."

"Not while I'm about," Ambrose cried, unsteadily.

He was a child.

"What a fire-eater!" teased Lydia. "Why, I'm quite frightened to be with you. It's like taking a terrier for a walk. Come along, quick!"

He came, but unwillingly. His face was still averted, and his lips swollen. Together, they walked beside the cricket field once more, and so out into Swains Lane and down to Kentish Town. It seemed very strange—after this splash of holiday—to be again in the dreary streets, to see women doing some of their week's shopping early, and all the windows crowded with signs and goods. Not for the first time did Lydia feel impressed by the callousness of a daily life which would have continued unchanged if she had been dead. And Ambrose? How did he feel? She stole a glance at that smouldering countenance. During the whole of the walk, although she had offered several observations, Ambrose had remained silent. He was still silent, but glowingly silent, as if, within, he was at

white heat. It was in silence, as they approached Sebastian's shop, that he stopped abruptly, looked down at Lydia, moistened his lips, and prepared to go. No outstretched hand, no smile, but a resolute darkness as of inward struggle.

"Not coming in to see my husband?" asked Lydia.

"No, I shan't." At first he was brusque. Then, with the sudden illumination of a smile, he shook his head. "I mustn't. I'd love to. I must hurry now. Good-bye!"

Still smiling in response to that radiance and his graceful, hat-raised lurch into the crowds of shoppers, Lydia pushed open the door. Above her head she heard the bell say, Ting, ting, trrring! Oh, what a choking smell of age and dust! Along in his lair, with his head bent over the desk, Sebastian laboured at the writing of a letter. All here was as before. Only within herself, in that soft, light heart, Lydia was conscious of change.

PART TWO

A STEP FORWARD

CHAPTER SIX: A DEMON SHOWS HIS FACE

I

"In my young days," said Sebastian, "I used to cycle quite a lot. At first on a bone-shaker, and then on the kind of thing you still see. I went with a number of other young fellows, and we got to know a good deal about the country districts near London. Those journeys served me well, because we took them on Sundays, and I used to go back alone during the week. I picked up quite a lot of good old stuff, here and there. You know, old glass and furniture. They'd been about for generations. Yes, the old days. Marvellous! You can't do that now. There's too many 'Ye Oldé Antique Shoppés.' God! The muck you can see in 'Ye Oldé Antique Shoppés'! Makes me sick to pass one of them. I can still smell the glue and varnish. And the tone of the countryside's altered: the old folks are either peppered with fakes, or they've grown greedy, and think every mouldy book's worth a thousand pounds. But all the same, if there weren't so many cars, I think I'd like to take a bicycle and visit some of the old haunts nowadays. After all, the country's not quite spoilt. It will be, soon."

"Yes," said Lydia. She was not really listening; but was looking at an illustrated Sunday newspaper. Bathing beauties, river girls, girls in shorts, girls leaping over fences, girls high-kicking at tennis. She was thinking: "Who was it said women were beautiful? Somebody blind, I should think. What a good job love and justice are both blind!" Aloud, after a long pause, she added: "I should think it was a good idea."

"What's a good idea?" demanded Sebastian, who had fallen deep into his own newspaper—one of those vast London sheets which it would take all day to read—and who had quite forgotten what he had been saying.

There was no reply. It was Sunday morning. The streets were still; and in the basement room, where it was always dark,

Lydia and Sebastian had just finished breakfast. The plates were still before them; the coffee cups were hardly emptied. Something had reminded Sebastian of his old cycling days, and he had spoken about them; but as he realised from Lydia's tone that she was not listening, he spoke no more. Frowning, he read his paper. The cause of the frown was disagreement with what he read, and not annoyance with Lydia for inattention; although Sebastian liked to think that what he said was interesting to her. She, turning the flimsier pages of her own paper, glanced up, saw the frown, and sat erect. The sun must be shining above. Ribs of brightness could be seen through the iron grating overhead. Swiftly, her mind went back to Sebastian's long speech. She had that unusual power of memory which enables the possessor to recompose a speech (in a voice very familiar to her) to which she has paid only perfunctory attention.

"If you'd like to take a bus or a train somewhere, and go into the country," Lydia said, very distinctly, "we'll go. I'd like to. It seems a fine day."

"Hm," drawled Sebastian, considering. "Hm; I don't know."

"Why not?" demanded Lydia. "We can be ready in half-an-hour."

Sebastian shook his head. He almost disappeared under the table, for in stretching his legs and putting his hands into his trousers pockets he slipped in the chair. Grinning, he surveyed Lydia mischievously from this lowly position.

"Too much trouble," he urged. Then, as she rose, he grumblingly agreed. "All right," he said. "Though what on earth——" Slowly, he shambled out of the room, still carrying his newspaper. Lydia found it later upon one of the beds, fully open, as though Sebastian, as he dressed, had stood reading it until the last moment.

Within three-quarters of an hour they were stumbling

through the darkened shop; and a moment later they were blinded by sunshine. The door in the shutter was pulled fast, and they were free. All about them was quiet, blinds drawn, milk-bottles standing beside doors, and newspapers sticking out of letter-boxes. When a motor-car rattled by it was possible to hear every wheeze of its springs. How different from the incessant racket of every day, when this same street shuddered under the weight of every kind of vehicle that made for or came from the Great North Road.

II

There was a long ride in the train, through masses of green. Lydia watched from the carriage window, and saw all the little gardens backing upon the railway line. It was May, and the rambler roses were beginning to bloom. Other flowers, unrecognisable at this distance by the untutored eye, flashed brilliantly as the train scudded past—little specks of red, white, blue, and yellow. As the hour grew later, luxurious men and women were to be seen sitting in the gardens. Here and there one was working, stooping over the flowers or mowing a lawn. While Sebastian observed all these things—especially the labour of the men—with a quizzical eye, Lydia was pleased, even elated.

"I'm so glad we came," she whispered to Sebastian. "Aren't you?"

"Hm," grunted Sebastian, agreeingly. His mouth was very ironically drawn down at the corners.

The carriage had been only half-filled at Waterloo; but as the stations flicked alongside more and more people entered. They were all dressed in their Sunday clothes, and looked as if they had just had their photographs taken. The curious trussed appearance of the men struck Lydia afresh; their squeaking shoes, the perspiration round their eyes, their kindli-

ness and humility. The girls talked together in whispers, and their giggling, although also whispered, was overdone. It was forced and false, through self-consciousness. They could neither laugh nor stop laughing. Idiots! Why couldn't they see they were being idiots? Lydia's foot was tapping. She had no patience with the yokel young of her sex. She stared fixedly from the carriage window, trying to banish awareness of the proximity of such sillies.

If she had been able to have her way, she thought, she would have lived in the country. Not always, but part of the time. In the Summer. Like this. Summer in a town was never pleasant. It would have been beastly on such a day to stop at home in the kitchen, with all the smuts and stuffiness pressing upon her head and crushing her. The smell of the joint, and the greens, and the hot iron of her stove . . . Stuffy, stuffy, stuffy . . . that dark room . . . everything so stale, stale, stale, stale, stale . . . What a lovely escape this was! Yet she ought to have cooked their little joint of lamb. She'd have to partly cook it when they got home. Otherwise it wouldn't keep. That was the worst of excursions; they threw the housekeeping out of gear. Such a small family as she and Sebastian made! Small, small; why hadn't they any babies? Jiggledy-jog; she was thinking like the train. That was the awful thing about living a routine life: soon you began to be able to think of nothing else. It was always money, food, sleep; money, food, sleep. If you had enough money you could have enough food, and a roof to sleep under. Human beings must have food and sleep. If they did not, they died. When Lydia had first gone out to work, the foreman who paid the girls each Saturday morning used to dump down each little pile of silver, saying, "More root!" How Lydia would have liked to be a character in a novel, where money was never mentioned, where the people spent their time playing and misunderstanding each other, and falling in love! These girls in the carriage were all

fed on love tales; and each of them, in her own heart, was a heroine.

"Love!" smiled Lydia. Without moving her head, she rolled her eyes to the corners, and stole a glance at Sebastian. He was sitting back in his place, beside her, staring straight before him. There was a little nick above one of his eyes—a nick that went with his most mocking, ridiculing smile. Otherwise his face was set in an expression of complete gravity. His hands lay, one of them with its palm uppermost, lightly upon his knees. His hat was off, and his hair looked as though, if one gave a single puff, it would all blow away. Lydia's heart softened to him. She smiled out of the window of the carriage, thinking no one saw her.

Now that they were advancing into the country, those who entered or left the carriage began to recognise or to be recognised by others. The burr of the Surrey accent was to be heard. Against the scent and beauty of the may trees, white and pink upon every hand, it was "Ah, Georrrge!" "Well, 'Arrry!" "Hullo, then! Heau's sulf?" The girls, too, giggled afresh, and made room, and chattered with happiness. They seemed less silly, less self-conscious, more like kiddies at a party. Clearly the suburbs were at an end. The ground rolled away from the railway line now, ascending to soft rotundities, descending again with enchanting grace to hedge and meadow. Trees flew together. All along the way, whenever the train stopped, birds were singing. It seemed to Lydia that amid such sights and sounds and delicious scents happiness must be unfailing. When she compared the loveliness through which they were passing with the gloom of her own kitchen, the dust-laden air of the shop, the mud-ingrained setts of the roadway in front of the shop, the weary Saturday-evening crowds of marketing men and women, she sighed deeply.

And as she sighed, she felt Sebastian's hand steal in behind

her arm, the fingers clasping her elbow. His shoulder was against hers. He was not looking; he still appeared to be intent upon the coloured photographs with which the carriage was decorated. Yet the mocking lines had deepened into lines of pain. He had seen—what? There was no knowing what he saw, or thought, or understood. He was a mystery. If only he had understood a little more—— Lydia's lids drooped. Her lips were parted. She was smiling obediently.

III

Long before midday, they were at Guildford, and out upon the ugly platform, and in the station yard, where a line of elderly and comfortable automobiles stood waiting to be hired as taxicabs. Three minutes later, Lydia was gazing up that hilly High Street which in sunshine retains so much of its old-fashioned and provincial charm. The street was crowded with cars, crawling in two streams, like ants upon separate trails. Sebastian seemed to know his way, for he began immediately to walk up the hill; and Lydia followed him in a dream. This was the country! The atmosphere was different; the policemen's uniforms and helmets were different; the shops were different. She could see the blue sky unfilmed by smoke. Trees were piercingly green, and not, as in London, dustily grey. It was Springtime—almost Summer;—and this sweet breeze, this tender green, this beautiful sky, created the picture of England as it was forever seen by poets and exiles. No wonder their hearts almost broke at the vision of such loveliness.

Sebastian, who had been walking in front, slackened speed and took Lydia's arm. He was beaming. There was even an unusual excitement, a buoyancy, in his manner.

"No place like London," he teased. "Haunted, holy ground. Eh? But it's good to get out of it occasionally. I grant you that. From London to England, or the story of a pilgrimage.

This is an old place. There are buildings here that go back to the sixteenth century. One of the worst books ever ill-written sets its scenes in the neighbourhood in the reign of King John. That's long enough ago, you'd think. But we're going on. You're no archæologist. What you want is the rolling heath and the eagle's eyrie. There's a good deal of common land hereabouts. Now the question is——"

He paused, glancing about him. Then he ran recklessly down a side-road, and Lydia saw that he was bent upon catching a small green omnibus which had just passed them. She ran too. They clambered on board the omnibus.

"We've done well!" panted Sebastian. "Oh, God!" He had put both hands to his chest, as if he were afraid. "It's all right. Nothing," he added. "Running after this beastly thing—— I was afraid we'd lose it."

Lydia thought, quite suddenly and without reason, that everybody she knew was old. Everybody, that is, except Ambrose. Eh, Ambrose! How funny that she should think of him just now, when she was in the country, in the sunshine, her heart stirred by the warm quiver of the Spring air. Well, Ambrose was young enough. How young? Twenty-five, twenty-six? Sometimes you'd have said twenty. She hadn't seen him now for a fortnight—she hadn't seen him since their meeting in Parliament Hill Fields. When they'd caught sight of old Mussolini. One, two, three, four—how many times had she seen him, in all? Half-a-dozen? He'd like this day. Not the bus, perhaps, with these fat girls; but the sun and the breeze. Glory, how lovely it was to-day! His hands were beautiful. "Beautiful!" They were very long and white and—clean! Lydia smiled, and peeped to see if Sebastian's hands were passably clean. Mischievously, she raised her eyes to his face. Hullo, hullo, he was breathing very fast still. Was he all right? Her expression changed. She became subtly watchful. It wouldn't do to let him see she was frightened.

Sebastian was fumbling in his trousers pocket for money with which to pay the conductor.

"Want some change?" asked Lydia, her handbag instantly open.

Sebastian shook his head. He was handing a coin to the conductor. He was quite serious, and put the tickets into his pocket as if he were preoccupied, leaning hard against her as he did this. As Lydia watched, she saw that the rapidity of his breathing was less. He was paler than he had been; but that might well be due to ordinary causes, the result of his many years of living in London. She wished he would sit upright, and not stoop so. She didn't like him to stoop. It made him look old; and it depressed her when he looked old. It frightened her.

"Why, couldn't *you* open an Oldé Antique Shoppé in the country?" she asked. "Glue and all. You'd be as well as anything if you lived in the country."

Sebastian sharply shook his head.

"I should pine for London," he answered, his head bobbing as the omnibus bumped. "So would you. Ah, you don't think so, but you would. See that chestnut tree? There's a glamour about the old town. Think of the theatres and the crowds, the excitements of all that activity—— 'That mighty heart.' You'd miss it."

"I do, now," Lydia said. She had not meant to be curt. After all, she had never in all her life tasted much of the excitement of London. How could you taste such excitement when you were always working?

"Bored." Sebastian did not ask: he stated. His shoulders rose and fell in a flash. "Oh, well——"

"I'm not bored. I'm restless. I don't know what I want," Lydia told him frankly.

"Dangerous," Sebastian murmured. "A dangerous state. Well, we must alter it. You'd better have a holiday."

Lydia did not rise to the enthusiasm he perhaps expected. She was cautious. It did not sound to her as if there were much behind his suggestion except the impulse of the moment. She said:

"Could you spare the time? Oh, well, I'm not going alone. What on earth should I do with myself? Have you ever been away by yourself? It's awful. It always rains or freezes. And you get tired as soon as you start walking. And if you sit down you get the fidgets. You're not wanted in your lodgings, and when you're not eating or sleeping you're wretched. I've done it, my boy, and I *know*. You long for bedtime to come round; you go home before the time's up; and in the train home you cry for joy. It's far better to be restless at home with you—so long as you don't mind it—than bored to death away, alone. No, if you could have gone——"

"Well, my dear old girl, how *can* I?" pleaded Sebastian. He was so gentle, so sweet, that Lydia was conscience-stricken. How could she worry him, when he was so kind? How was it that she could still think of nobody but herself? There was only one thing to be done:

"Shut up the shop." But Lydia knew, as she spoke, that such a thing was impossible. She shook her head, ruefully.

"You could go on one of these tours, you know," suggested Sebastian.

"What, with a lot of old cats!" cried Lydia. "No fear! They'd look down their noses at me—think I was no class. And I should hate them all, and mope, and it would be thoroughly sickening. I shouldn't enjoy it a bit."

"Damn it, I wish you'd get some friends." They were both distracted from the lovely soft landscape.

"Besides, what would *you* do?"

"Mother Way!" he announced triumphantly. "Either she'd look after me or you could *take* her."

"What a remedy!" she cried. "Kill or cure. You'll have to think of something better than that."

"I can't hear you." Sebastian put his head closer.

"This is a bad place to talk," Lydia said. She meant that she could not, with the possibility of being overheard, express her opinion of Mrs. Way either as housekeeper or as companion upon a journey. "It makes me sound so fussy. Let's put it off for now. Look—well just *look* at those hills. They don't look real."

"Go on," groaned Sebastian. "The rest of the sentence is: 'if you saw it in a picture——' "

But Lydia was not listening. She had been caught by something he had said. "I wish you'd get some friends." What did you call a friend? Wasn't—in a way, wasn't Ambrose a friend? Perhaps not. But he was more her friend than Mother Way. More than her own mother. More than Dad. What about Sebastian? Well, well! It would be a strange kind of husband that wasn't your best friend. Never mind for just now. She didn't want to rattle her brains: the bus was doing quite enough of that. All she wanted to do was to drink in the beauty of the scene before her eyes. Away to the left of the road stretched broad fields; and beyond them was a ridge of high land, reddish in its bare places, and in other parts so exquisitely wooded that the trees appeared woven together and as soft as maidenhair fern. Never elsewhere, save upon the Downs, had Lydia seen such enchanting contours; and the warm sunshine gave glowing beauty to the whole expanse.

"That's where we're going," declared Sebastian. "Time to get off. Come along!"

He was upon his feet, wavering as the omnibus swayed. Still confused, Lydia followed him. A moment later they were standing by the roadside, alone, a little cloud of white dust already beginning to conceal from view the omnibus from which they had just alighted.

IV

Throughout the afternoon they strolled upon the heights, protected from the hot sun by the trees, treading upon soft pine needles, inhaling the scented air. At times, between the trees, they could look out and down upon the lower ground, the small hedge-enclosed meadows, the fields in which young green corn was at this distance indistinguishable from grass. Echoes rolled up to them as they sat gazing. Always, as they went or rested, the calm of the day tranquillised them and at length was the cause of sadness. Lydia heard Sebastian whisper to himself more than once, and when he whispered he frowned, and drew down the corners of his mouth, his hands deep in his trousers pockets. At such times he had no time to spare for the landscape, and no words at all for Lydia. She supposed that he was concerned over something to do with his business, and restrained the impulse to interrupt so melancholy a reverie. But Lydia was wrong. Sebastian was not thinking of the business, but of Lydia. Strange matters were working in his mind, and these, to Lydia's astonishment, he presently proceeded to declare.

"Don't you—at seaside or foreign places—I mean, private hotels and boarding-houses—get to know people fairly quickly?" was what Sebastian said.

Well, what did *that* mean? Of all the images!

"What sort of people?" asked Lydia, provokingly.

"Other visitors. Old girls and young boys. Anybody that happens to be staying there."

Lydia thought: "I'm not going. He needn't keep on. It's silly of him to keep on. You'd think I was *ill*." Aloud, she said coolly, in a repressive tone:

"*I* shouldn't. I shouldn't want to. I'd rather be lonely. Did *you* get to know anybody at the Vanstones', when you stayed there? Only me. And me because you——" Lydia checked

herself. She meant, at the bottom of her heart, "because you saw I was a kid, and out of it, and thought you'd be kind. And you were too shy to talk to anybody else, and despised all the others for being smug." But she did not say all this. Instead, she added: "Besides, I'm not going away, so you needn't think it."

"Well, I wasn't at the Vanstones' long. And I thought, perhaps, women—— Isn't there a freemasonry . . . Besides, I'm different. I don't get on with people. You *do*."

"I don't. I got *off* with you," protested Lydia.

"Yes, you do. And you'd go if you had somebody to go with," he retorted. "I've got this firmly in my mind. Yes, a little tour——" He was smiling at his own plans. "A little tour in France or Italy. How's that? A change of scene." He seemed almost hopeful. "At least, it's an idea. Oh, when I think of the years I've wasted!"

Sebastian had gone off upon another theme. He was thinking of the past.

"Yes, well, *don't!*" cried Lydia. "You can't have them back again. Why worry?"

"Once you're over fifty, half your time is spent in the past, my dear. And of course you're right; I'm a bore. Where shall we go, now? Somewhere in *that* direction? With luck, we may find ourselves. Find ourselves: only the poets do that, I suppose. 'Escape me—never!' . . . You didn't know I was a poet, did you? Well, I'm not. Never was. But I can't help envying some of the youngsters I see. They don't know anything; they're as ignorant and self-confident as youngsters have always been; and yet I envy them. They can still afford to be spendthrifts of time and energy. It's a wonderful thing. A whole lifetime before them: no wonder they seem to have got leisure for every extravagance. Take young Thayer, for example—*your* friend."

"*My* friend?" It had been so unexpected that Lydia felt her heart spring. At once, she added, defensively: Why, I hardly know him!"

"He's a good-looking boy; he's idle, ignorant, self-conscious. And yet——" Sebastian paused. "I like him all right. But I envy him. He's not worn. He's young—perhaps he's adventurous. I don't think he is. He ought to be, at his age."

Lydia was listening eagerly.

"He's a nice boy," she said, drawlingly. In what a false voice! It seemed as if her heart had turned to water. She was breathing very rapidly, and her fingers were pinched together. What was the matter with her?

"He's well enough. But what's he *done?*" demanded Sebastian, waving a hand in the air. "Of course I know he's got a sort of style. There's a refinement about him. It's a trick, a veneer, something a man has who's been sheltered from contact with all that's destructive of self-confidence—and that's the struggle to live. Put him up against life, and what would you find? He'd crumple. Like all his generation. They'd all crumple, unless they had something solid under their veneer. D'you see? And they haven't anything!" Suddenly, in a savage voice, he added: "Compare him and me, then."

"There's no comparison," cried Lydia, without a pause. She was too swift. It was as though she had been waiting for an opportunity to speak the words. "It's too silly."

"Yet we're both men," added Sebastian. "The only thing is that I'm setting while he's rising still. By God, Lydia, I don't know why the old men don't murder the young, or else the young men murder the old."

"Well, they will, when they're all as crazy as they seem," declared Lydia, in exasperation. "Let's go down here. It looks as if it might lead somewhere good."

She drew his attention to a wide path between the undergrowth, and as she saw that he was ready to take it she preceded

him. Indeed, it was necessary that she should in some way check this talk, because it was making her heart beat to suffocation and filling her with horror. Why should she mind speaking of Ambrose? Why was she confused, indignant, troubled, when Sebastian compared himself with Ambrose? What had happened to her that she should feel suddenly so deeply excited by the mention of the boy's name? He was a child—somebody to laugh at, to tease, to protect. Only that. But her sight was blurred as she stumbled on; and a kind of forked lightning of irritation shot through her again and again. Why was it that Sebastian always battered at a subject? Why would he not let Ambrose rest? Ambrose had done no harm. She didn't know him. She was interested, amused: nothing more! Nothing more!

Blindly, Lydia groped between the brambles which plucked at her stockings. All above grew darker as the path descended and the heavy young foliage became more dense. The sultry atmosphere of the wood threatened her. Down, down; there was thick mud in little hollows; stones were dislodged, and slid, bruising her feet through the thin soles of the shoes she wore. Down into the darkness, to a world hidden from sun and wind, where all was dank and oppressive. But she must go on, to escape from the thoughts which had been alarmed as birds are alarmed by the flinging of a stone or the loud report of a rifle. She was in tumult.

"Hey! Not so fast, old girl!" called Sebastian, from behind. "I can't keep up with you."

Obediently, but with a curious unfamiliar feeling that was very near to sullen bitterness, Lydia waited, averting her eyes as he scrambled down to her side. Too fast, eh? Well, she was young. She was one of those same young people of whom he was so envious. Was she always to be marking time to meet his slow pace?

That mood passed instantly, though horror of herself for experiencing it would recur. She was once again Lydia. She had not known how rapidly she had been going. Was not a demon at her heels? In her heart? Consumed with her own excited thoughts, she had stepped wildly without noticing anything but the murk and treachery of the path. Besides, her instinct had been to fly, to hide; and one in her situation could neither fly nor hide. Whatever happened, Lydia knew that she must creep slowly, holding her head up so that everybody she knew might see from her face that nothing was amiss. Useless to be afraid. After all, what had she to fear? That later mood, of grandiloquence, was hustled aside. She had nothing to fear. No need to keep her head up. It was all rubbish. And silly and horrid.

Sebastian was at her side. She heard him panting, saw his flushed cheeks under the shabby old brown hat, the wry mouth behind his straggly moustache. She was conscious of these things with a new detachment. Meagre, sallow, sharp-chinned, weary. She had never seen him so clearly, or with such absence of inclination. And this also startled Lydia and alarmed her. Accustomed to dismisss any pain by means of ridicule, she rallied now. It was essential that she should do so. If that was what the country air did for you, you were safer at home! she thought, trying to cheat herself into ease once more. Safer and happier. Sebastian, too, would be happier at home, in the fusty atmosphere of the shop, growing older and older, dustier and dustier, just as his treasures were doing. Sebastian——

"Please God we don't have to climb up again!" he was exclaiming, grimly. "Look at it!"

Glancing back, they could both see the steepness of the path, until it was lost in a tangle of woodland. Up, up, went the trees, straight and tall, until the vista became thick and confused. It was impossible for the eye to follow a way through the trees

to the blue sky overhead. Insensibly, their voices were lowered. They seemed to be surrounded by choking darkness, hidden even from each other.

"Hm. Babes in the Wood," Lydia said, suppressing a little shudder.

"Yes." Sebastian was not answering her; he was gazing about him, through the matted undergrowth. "Well, there's still a path. Always a path, you see!"

Lydia turned away, to continue the descent. For some moments they alternately jumped and felt their way among the bushes; until at length, from below, they heard the sound of a motor horn.

"Civilization!" gasped Sebastian. "First time I've ever loved a motor!"

A moment later the gray of an asphalt road could be seen by glimpses through the trees. The path widened, became less steep, less strong. At last the woodland stopped; only grass and scrub remained.

"Well, we're out of the wood," Sebastian said, squeezing alongside Lydia for the few remaining yards. He took her arm, his shoulder pressing against hers, his chin close to her ear. Lydia, still excited, not quite mistress of herself, for an instant stiffened her arm. It was nothing: the shrinking was past in an instant. But that stiffening was too obvious for a sensitiveness as acute as Sebastian's to miss. As if her arm had burned him, he withdrew the hand, which fell helplessly at his side.

Glancing sideways, with swift stealth, Lydia saw that his lips were very tightly pressed together. Was it his heart? What had he thought? She stretched out an impulsive hand. But as soon as he realised that she could see him, Sebastian stepped further aside, smiled with quite ordinary lightness, and appeared to be absorbed in study of their whereabouts. He looked to right and left along the hilly road which they had just

reached, nodding in half-recognition of the scene, frowning as if puzzled, and at last raising his hand and pointing in the direction which they were to follow. No word was spoken between them; no notice was taken of the incident; all seemed as before.

CHAPTER SEVEN: FIRE!

I

CLANG, clang, clang, clang, clang! Lydia had just reached the door leading from her kitchen stairs to the shop, when she heard the familiar bell of a flying fire engine. The harsh noise of the engine's heavy rumble over the setts of the roadway, and a flash of light upon those polished helmets, drew her eye to the shop window. Fire! called somebody from without. There was a scattering noise of people running. Even Sebastian was drawn from his desk, and came out to see what was no longer to be seen.

"Hullo, hullo!" he cried, as he found Lydia close to him. "Hear that?"

"No!" laughed Lydia. "What was it?" Then: "I'm going to look!" She hurried to the door of the shop, and saw the stragglers trotting along—a few children, holding the hands of others, smaller children; a few older men and women. Otherwise, the road was clear, but at a distance, a little fainter, she could hear the bell upon the fire engine still clanging. Then silence. From the opposite direction came a further clanging; and another engine, summoned from a farther station, came skidding against the tramlines, swaying, the firemen holding themselves aboard with difficulty, and one of them steering, his legs straddled, and his body thrust forward above the wheel. Clang, clang, clang. Windows were open everywhere, and heads hanging out of them. More people, running as if from disaster, followed in the wake of the second engine.

It was night, and there was no moon in the sky, which was dark with cloud. But as Lydia gazed after the engine and the runners, she could see a red glow beyond, a glow that paled and darkened, and a volume of black smoke; and once, it seemed, a great flame which leapt vehemently and sang again before she could be sure whether it was in fact a flame or

something imagined. The bells were silent now, and the sound of the rushing engines had ceased. Even the second flock of people had disappeared, and only one or two, walking briskly, were to be seen. Listening intently, Lydia fancied she heard a low roaring, but whether it came from the throats of human beings, or whether it was the noise of distant traffic, proceeding undisturbed by the late clamour, she did not know. But she stood watching from the doorway, as the redness in the sky spread and dimmed and brightened, and the smoke rose, empurpling the red and giving it a yet more sinister aspect.

"Why not go and have a look?" suggested Sebastian, in her ear, speaking almost in a whisper. "It's not far away."

Lydia jumped. She had not known that he was behind her. That proximity, his gentle voice, a darkness under his eyes, caused her heart to beat a little faster. He frightened her. She was all nerves.

"Shall I?" In two minutes, with a cloak over her shoulders, she was in the street, and following other walkers, round the road where the tramcars went, and so through narrow streets towards that alarming redness. It was with a sigh of relief that she felt herself enshrouded in the darkness, escaping from her own uneasy reflections, which were the more uneasy because they gave her no clear assurance, but only a vague bewilderment.

As she went, she heard the sounds of a third and a fourth engine, but more remotely, and ran a few steps, from excitement. Then she walked more sedately, was caught again by the agitation which had caused her to run, heard an old man panting heavily, and overtook some children who were delayed by the briefer steps of their juniors.

"Know where it is, lady?" a little girl called.

"Bessborough," shouted a man, before Lydia could speak. He was running by, and had startingly made no noise in

running because of the rubber-soled shoes he wore. The man, running fast, was instantly out of sight.

Bessborough Street! That was where there were some of the large old houses of the district, once built for the opulent, and now, with the social decline of this neighbourhood, let out in floors and single rooms to a dozen tenants or more. Bessborough! Mercy! If there was a fire there, with all that close-packed humanity, and if in the rising wind it spread rapidly, many lives might be lost! Those crowds, and the kids; the long flights of stairs. Lydia could see it all. The picture sent a sharp pang to her heart. She began to run again. And as she did so she found herself upon the extreme outskirts of a crowd that was flocking to the scene of the fire. It was all a moving crowd, but it had already been slowed by congestion ahead. Hundreds of black figures were gathered together, and those about her were closing. She must be very near. Sure enough, the next turning upon the left was Bessborough Street, and Lydia could see the reflection of yellow flames straight above the fire. Angry storms of smoke were being blown about by a rising wind, and the redness spread from cloud to cloud in an uneasy firmament.

"Ooo!" shrieked a woman, pointing. "Look at it!"

The yellow light was fiercer. Now the crowd was becoming dense. It was difficult to walk. All had their heads raised, and upon some of the faces that brightness was again reflected, giving them a ghastly pallor. The little street lamps were mere specks of light, insignificent candles, by contrast with the glow. There it was! Lydia was abreast of the street, looking down between the tall houses. She could see the belching of smoke and steam from windows some distance away, and at times the leaping of flames. She could hear the murmur of the crowd, the hiss of water, a crackling, and above every other noise a low sinister *something* that was the fire itself. Sometimes there would be a cry; once a woman screamed as there

was a collapse of some wooden structure which roused a storm of sparks. Excited, her teeth chattering, Lydia drew the cloak closer about her body.

"Have they got everybody out?" she asked a woman who was beside her.

"It's the 'ole row. It's the 'ole row!" the woman cried. She was beside herself, jerking her body and raising a skinny fist in the air. She was an elderly woman, curiously wizened, hatless and beshawled, her wispy hair flying and her eyes sticking wildly out of a blizzard-grey face. "They'll never stop it. Them old 'ouses is like firewood. No better'n firewood, they ain't. I used to live there—not where it's alight; the other side. Op'site. Look at it! Look at *that!* E-ee! Pore souls! Pore souls! They're done for. They'll 'ave nothink left. No, 'ome, no clo'es, no nothink. . . ."

She turned about violently, in a frenzy, her throat closing so that her voice was like the scrabble of gravel, and her mouth gaping open, showing gums in which one or two long teeth seemed to snarl.

"Yes, but have they got them out?" asked Lydia, again, desperately. That was all she wanted to know.

"It's a shame!" shrieked the woman. "There ought to be fire escapes, same as they have in America. Every 'ouse ought to 'ave one. What chances has people like us got to get away? Aigh? And them pore people, lookin' round, tryin' to save their bits——"

"She doesn't know if they're saved," said a voice behind Lydia—the voice of a woman. "Nobody knows."

There was a wailing noise from somewhere in the street where the fire was. Then a roar.

"Caught another!" the murmur went round.

"Ee!" cried the woman who had been speaking to Lydia.

Lydia could not bear this any more. She felt as though she were suffocating. Her hair was being blown across her face

and across her mouth. She was breathless. She began slowly and gently to move away, at first, her craving for escape and excitement sated, with the object of returning home, but gradually, as she became wedged among others who were in movement, and as her effort to escape carried her unresistingly towards the fire, with the knowledge that she would have to do whatever the others allowed her to do. She was a prisoner. She was jostled from behind and from both sides; an elbow in her back almost flung her over; and she would have fallen but for the press of people. One or two stalwarts were clearing a path for themselves by pushing and shoving; and the crowd, although individually resentful, made way, as crowds do, for those who shouldered from the rear. As a smaller stone is whirled along in the wake of a larger, more violent body, so Lydia was whirled behind the stalwarts, punched and elbowed and scuffled, until, as they did, she reached the front of the crowd, where a rope had been stretched across the road, and where policemen stood on guard. She was dishevelled; her cloak had been torn from her shoulders, and was with difficulty replaced. She was gasping for breath, humiliated at her powerlessness to withstand the mass weight of those about her, almost crying with distress; but she was also, at length, filled with a heat of triumph at attaining the front of the crowd.

From this point she could see the firemen at work within one of the houses, and the streams of water turned upon another; the charred wood lit up by the leaping flames, and the shattered windows glistening with water. Lengths of great hose lay everywhere about the road, and little figures, their brass helmets less brilliant than they had been, ran about like flurried ants, dragging the heavy hose, disappearing, coming again, mysterious, heroic, swift, orderly in a chaos of disorder. Within the circle of fire there was an unnatural light, amid which everything seemed to be sodden and dripping. Above the houses, now that she was so near, Lydia saw only thick

streams of smoke and steam. Below them, at a distance, pressed back almost to the ropes, were some of those who had escaped from the flames. The sight was ghastly, for the poor creatures were shivering and whimpering, or were standing, sullen and bewildered, looking upon the destruction of their homes. Most of them were fully dressed; but here and there an elderly person had been roughly huddled into clothes, and babies were wrapped in curtains or coats for warmth. All were sunk in despair. For them, the excitement had passed. All that now remained to them was the dying spectacle and the knowledge that they were to have no roof of their own that night.

Here, quite close at hand, was a young woman hushing a crying baby, rocking from foot to foot, hunching the heavy child up with a great effort, and making a hissing sound through her closed teeth. "Sh-sh-sh . . ." A little farther away stood a man in his shirt sleeves, his back to Lydia, watching the progress of the fire. His shirt was torn and stained; his trousers were blackened with water and soiled by contact with the ruins of fire. He leaned back upon a railing, and appeared to be in a state of exhaustion, dazed by what he had experienced. Near him, hanging upon the same railing against which he leaned, was a torn coat. His hat was nowhere to be seen. Probably it had been trampled under foot in some early skirmish with the hose. One of the policemen came across the road and began to talk to this man, apparently trying to persuade him to something, and speaking very earnestly. The man listened, but shook his head, and at last the policeman ceased to plead, and stood at his side, watching as the man watched, eagerly, and from time to time making some comment to his companion. Lydia could see now that he wore a sergeant's stripes upon his sleeve. Farther away, beyond the scarlet engines, were piles of unrecognisable objects—most likely, Lydia thought, articles of furniture which had been saved from the fire. Tiny dark figures were moving about there, lost in

the gloom, still carrying burdens from place to place, and setting them down as if in some sort of order. Lydia, absorbed, had forgotten her own cares: she could only observe, shuddering with cold and excitement, spellbound by what she saw and by her sensations.

How long she had stood there, she did not know; but at last something happened which awoke her with a start to immediate reality. There was a movement of disintegration in the crowd behind her. A few of the early comers, perhaps, were turning away; and a fresh phalanx of sightseers was struggling for favorable situation. Somebody, of neither party, was being crushed in the mêlée, and called out, piercingly: "Oo, you're killing me. Oo! Oo! Christ!" The cry attracted the notice of the policeman upon guard, and he turned. Lydia saw his red face and bristling straw-coloured moustache under the heavy helmet, heard his growl; and, as the policeman turned, those behind Lydia pressed ferociously against her, so that she was forced forward against the rope, almost into the policeman's arms. There was a scuffle, a rush.

"Nah then, nah then!" shouted the policeman, extending his arms for the purpose of stemming the moving tide, and thrusting back a man who was straining at the rope. "Hey! Steady on, there!" His cry attracted the notice of the sergeant, who came to support his officer. But it also attracted the notice of the man in the shirtsleeves, who looked round with some impatience. Lydia, by accident struck in the breast by the policeman's uplifted elbow, cried out protestingly: "Oh!" and there was a little struggle beside her. For an instant the attention of the crowd was drawn from the already-dwindling fire to that slight combat which was caused by the roughness of two or three young and unscrupulous men, fighting to get nearer. Nothing, however, could keep Lydia from staring, not at the two policemen, or at the several combatants, but at the stranger who stood in his shirt sleeves leaning against the

railing near by. For in this stranger she had recognised her enigma of the restaurant, of the averted accident, of the Hampstead Ponds. Could it really be he? She was incredulous. Her lips parted. A nervous shiver ran through her body, and she brushed the blown hair away from her eyes. It was impossible that she should be mistaken, even in this broken light.

Who was pushing her between the shoulders and driving her forward? "Get away! Get away! You beast!" She strove to keep her feet, to resist the savage pressure, to prevent herself from being swept away. In vain. Under the strain imposed upon it, the rope which had been drawn across the road slipped one of its knots, and those at the head of the crowd charged forward, some of them involuntarily, until by the eagerness of those behind them they were carried right past the two policemen who sought to stay the rush. There was great confusion in this semi-darkness, lit very strangely by the glow above the burning houses. Two or three more policemen ran from their posts to the invaded section of the road, dragging the slack rope; but they were too late. In that eddy of turbulence, Lydia had been lifted and almost thrown at the stranger's feet. Doubled by the onset, she struggled to keep her feet, and stood, breathing fiercely, full of anger, the palms of her hands moist, and her teeth clenched. What a sight for any observer! Just so might a young virago have been pictured at the barricades, lips parted in fury, head thrown back, spirit possessed by a thousand devils. Her hair was in disorder, her cloak hanging from one shoulder, her neck bare, heart thudding, and her eyes black with excitement.

"You!" exclaimed the stranger, with that curious dark smile of irony. "You!"

But, although he smiled, he acted instantly. Like lightning, he interposed his bulk between Lydia and the crowd. The breadth of his shoulders, and the muscular strength of his body, would have been useless if these others had been charg-

ing; but they were already in disorder, so that their progress was checked. The stranger's left arm hung limply at his side, but with his right arm he drew Lydia quickly to the shelter of an open gateway which was behind. His strength, his promptness, brought their cheeks very near together, almost touching, and she saw his lips closely set. Not smiling now; but stern, as they had been that night at the restaurant. His face was white, and there was grime upon it from the fire. She saw his square jaw, the thick neck, the delicate ear. . . . This was a man, resolute and without fear. She was impressed, and, being impressed, sought instinctively and characteristically to conquer her excitement by a jest. "Napoleon!" thought Lydia, laughing exultantly in secret. "Old Napoleon!"

When she was safe, the stranger dropped his arm, and stood back. Triumph was in his manner. His head was lifted. His eyes gleamed. He had forgotten the fire; he had forgotten his left arm; he was glowing with satisfaction.

"Again," he said, in gentle raillery, although he breathed fast. "You seem to be always in trouble, I think. You lead so reckless a life!"

"Oh, Lord!" murmured Lydia, to herself. Unconsciously she spoke aloud. "Oh, Lord! Just look what I've done now!"

Her mind was still confused, and she was still trembling with excitement. Her breast was rising and falling in agitation. But she could smile. In this scene of darkness and consternation, with those ant-like figures moving swiftly about, and the wind, damped by spray, rising and swirling along between the tall houses, and in close proximity to a stranger who half interested and half-repelled her, she could still smile. She saw him quite plainly now, his waistcoat torn, his shirt fouled by water and by contact with charred timbers, his face paled, with one great black smudge across the chin, his air of exhaustion after great effort. In spite of her feelings, she had recovered sufficiently to be able to notice these things, to marvel at them, and

to recognise some quality in him with which hitherto she had been unfamiliar. As if he could read the darting perceptions and admissions:

"You see?" said the stranger. "Now you will have to stay here for a little while, eh? A prisoner. That does not appeal to you at all, I think. But you can't go through *that*. You must wait until I can bring you safely through." As he spoke, he shrugged one shoulder towards the crowd, and smiled again, enjoyingly; while Lydia, following the direction of his eyes, and contemplating the black confusion from which she had escaped, bit her lip in dismay. Well, was he not right?

II

The crowd began to thin, a fact of which Lydia took careful note as she glanced every now and then through the increasing darkness. The glow above the houses had diminished; and the clouds rolled more inkily overhead. A sense of greater cold filled the air; it seemed even that a very fine rain had begun to fall. Lydia shivered, drawing her cloak close at the throat and folding her arms so as to conserve the natural warmth of her body. As the crowd grew less dense, ways would open through which it would be possible to pass without too much difficulty. Stealthily she looked this way and that, without moving her head. She was calculating her chances of escape. Could she run now? But, if she was examining the chances, so was the stranger. He did not speak to her; did not obviously imprison her; but he stood beside the gateway in such a position that she could not leave its refuge without his knowledge. She had one hope. It was that when the sergeant returned from superintending the re-tying of the rope he would engage the stranger's attention. Then, unobserved, she could slip into the crowd; and once she was there all would be easy. Look, he was coming!

But the stranger had been as quick as Lydia. He took a step forward.

"I shall go now, sergeant," he said.

"Very good, sir. How's the arm?"

"It's nothing. Give me a lift with my coat, will you? Eh-eh! Wait. Right. Thanks. You have my address, if you want it?"

"Yes, sir."

There was a nod and a salute. The stranger turned to Lydia.

"If you are ready," he said, in his slow fashion, "I will see you through the crowd. No farther!" he added, smiling again. "Come, you are surely not going to deny me that privilege."

Cornered, without hope of escape, Lydia surrendered.

"I wasn't thinking about that," she retorted.

"Weren't you?"

"No; I was wondering what you'd done with your hat."

"Hat? Ah! I wonder what I *have* done with it!" He put his hand to his head, as if he sought the hat, and adroitly converted his gesture into a return salute to the crisply moustached ginger policeman. "Good-night, good-night."

The girl with the baby stopped rocking it, and came close to the stranger's side.

"Good-night, sir," she said. "And God bless you, sir!"

"Another time," answered the stranger. "I hope he—she . . ." He touched the sleeping baby's round soft cheek with his forefinger, raised his hand in farewell, and led the way towards the end of the road.

The crowd was very much smaller. It was composed largely of stragglers who, having arrived, had no power to drag themselves away. They would wait about until they fell asleep or until they could follow an ambulance or a retreating fire-engine through the deserted streets and so to their own homes. But several of those who were nearest looked inquisitively at Lydia and her escort, as at two who had inside knowledge of

the fire. Some of them seemed to call out questions concerning the fire; but these came through the darkness as unintelligible barkings of noise. In the circumstances, Lydia felt inclined to lower her head and hurry through those who remained; but her eagerness brought a few members closer, and there was even some pressure, which made the stranger mutter something sharply—as if he were in pain—under his breath.

"Have you hurt your arm, then?" Lydia asked, at that.

"A little. Sprained it, I think. I had a fall."

"Were you . . ." She jerked her head backwards, in the direction from which they had come. "Were you helping there?"

"What, lighting the fire? Or putting it out? No, no. I just happened to be passing, and I saw some folk bringing out tables and chairs. Naturally, I thought I would help also. That was all."

"No babies, I suppose," pursued Lydia, suspiciously.

He stopped.

"What? Oh, I *know* what you are trying to imagine! That I'm a hero! That's it, isn't it! You picture me fighting the flames with one hand while I rescue children with the other. As they do in the pictures." He laughed aloud. "How quickly your mind jumps! Why, I believe you really are interested in me! You would like to make me out a—— How sorry I am! I must go back. Surely there is *somebody* I can rescue—if it is only myself!"

"All right; laugh away!" said Lydia. "So you're not a hero, then?"

"A few tables and chairs. An aspidistra or two. Stay, a canary! Ah, how lucky: a canary! And do you know, as I brought it out, that bird chirped at me from his cage. Isn't that wonderful? He thought it was supper-time. I almost expected him to trill. But he didn't do that. So unheroic of him!"

"Well, I'm much obliged to you for bringing me through the crowd," Lydia said, in a moment.

"I was obliged to *do* it," he answered; smiling, and from his tone she guessed that he was smiling. Then: "Would you like to know my name?"

Would she? Lydia felt her pulses quicken. But as for that—— She said:

"I'm dying to know it."

"Perhaps you know it already? Ah, well, perhaps we shan't meet again. It wouldn't interest you. Never mind. But I know *your* name, you know. Yes, I know quite a number of things about you. I have even wondered if I dare venture to come into your husband's shop, and ask for you, so that we might be introduced. As you seemed to *insist* upon an introduction, although—if you will excuse me—that's a very antediluvian idea. It passed with the war which you have forgotten. But your husband looks very acute, and as if he had a mordant tongue, and I thought it better not to come there. When one is not certain of one's reception, one thinks of all sorts of reasons . . . I know nothing of *objets d'art*, and in any discussion—— Yes; but you needn't be afraid that I shall presume upon our very accidental acquaintance. I shall not. That is, unless you desire it."

He bent towards her, as if he bowed in walking. Lydia felt that although he appeared to be prompting a courtesy he was in reality mocking her. In that case she could be his equal.

"*I* shan't desire it," she said, cheekily.

"No?" His tone was one of disappointment. Ah, thought Lydia, he was altogether too sure of himself. Another tyrant! Old Alexander the Great! She was now as triumphant as he had been earlier. What was he saying? The stranger continued, dolefully: "What *can* one do! At times life is very difficult. To you, perhaps, *not* so difficult, as you are a woman, and see clearly; but to me, extraordinarily difficult. As for instance in

this case——" He interrupted himself. "Ah, why didn't I rescue a baby! It would all have been different! The fatal mistake: a canary when it should have been a baby! Such things have changed the course of Fate throughout the history of civilization!"

They had reached Kentish Town Road. All was shuttered. It was midnight. His speech must be checked.

"Well, I don't know about that," began Lydia, who could see in the near distance the dim light of Sebastian's shop-window, and to whom that light brought a flood of contrition at her long absence. "But I *do* know that I seem always to be saying 'good-night' to you, and I'm going to do it again *now*. At once!"

"So long as you never say good-bye," he answered gravely, "and mean it, I can endure——" Then, bowing slightly, he added: "Good-night!"

As he did this he seemed to wait for some final word from herself; but Lydia did not again speak. A moment later he was gone, and she lost sight of him as he turned the corner of the road along which they had come.

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE VISITOR

I

THERE seemed to be no rest for Lydia's thoughts. She could not sleep. She lay in bed thinking and thinking, trying to compose herself, trying to dismiss these difficult memories and reflections from her mind. All was in vain. The room was not quite dark, owing to the fact that the street lamps opposite shone directly across the road and through the holland blind, and in at the sides of the blind in spears of brightness; and Lydia could see the curtain blowing in a draught from the open window. It flicked lingeringly against the dressing-table, causing a soft noise by the contact. Upon the ceiling a faintly figured reflection moved in unison. Now and again there would be a little hum from afar, and then the sharp skirr of a passing motor, with other wandering lights as accompaniment, the new light fading, the sound dying away to a hum, and then nothing. It would be succeeded by the familiar grumble and flash of an all-night tramcar. Silence, but for that distant roar, which never ceased.

Sebastian lay near her in his own bed. She could not hear him breathing. Was he asleep? If he was still wakeful, he was not moving. He slept as a rule very soundly; but Lydia's movements were all made with stealth, for fear of arousing him. Such care, long exercised, had become habitual to her, for without sleep Sebastian was always drowsy and irritable during the following day. He was not a strong man; he was easily made unfit for his daily routine; undisturbed sleep was a necessity to him. Yet *did* he sleep? Did he not rather lie there within a yard of her, turning over and over in his mind the intricacies of his business, planning, considering, remembering the past as he said men and women of his age inevitably did? Lydia could not be sure. She could be sure of nothing that concerned Sebastian. She felt that she was entirely ignorant of all his

thoughts, all his imaginings. There were times when she felt that she had never known and never understood him; that he was a stranger to her, startlingly unrecognisable where she had supposed herself most safe. Did Sebastian feel the same in thinking of herself?

She must go to sleep. If she got up tired in the morning, pale and weary after so restless a night, he would notice it. She could never hide heavy eyes from him. He would observe them; perhaps he would say nothing. And if he said nothing, what would he be *thinking?* Oh, she was so tired of thinking! If only she could sleep! She was over-excited. She had been over-excited by the fire, by the stranger, by remembrance of that scene in the wood. Had it really occurred only yesterday? Sunday; yesterday: It seemed a month ago! A Winter month, age-long. She wasn't happy. Quite suddenly, she had lost her contentment. She was always revolting now against the atmosphere of this place, that choked her. It made her impatient. She wasn't patient. She was horrid. Horrid. Beastly to be horrid.

Who liked her? Nobody! Not in the whole world anybody who loved her. Sebastian was in some way displeased with her. Dad and Mother were both shocked at her. Old Mother Way didn't like anybody. She was a spy: inquisitiveness had taken the place of love in her nature. She was inquisitive. Lydia hated inquisitive people. There wasn't anybody else who cared whether she lived or died, except—— Her mind hurried onward, blurring the impression of Ambrose; but as often as she tried to change the current of her thoughts, the same stealthy memories kept intruding, cheating all her carefully erected safeguards, and bringing back to her attention the harsh voice in which Sebastian had spoken in the wood, and the jump her heart had given, and—Ambrose.

Where was the boy? What was he doing? Unconsciously, Lydia gave a heavy sigh. She could not keep her body still, and the bedclothes made their soft murmur as she stirred. It was

as if they, too, sighed. Five years. She remembered her marriage. They had stayed in Littlehampton for a week, and it had been amusing to go with Sebastian as he poked about the shops there, squinting in at windows, innocently asking the prices of antique furniture and old china. She had held his arm lightly, her heart dancing with joy. How happy she had been! She had been young then; everything (even a holiday) had been new and fresh for her. She had often turned the wedding-ring upon her finger, laughing softly to herself; and once she had kissed it as the symbol of all the happiness she had ever known. Long ago! Long ago! Time passed so quickly; and the things that were new joy to her became gradually familiar; and at last old and far off.

And now, after these placid years, broken only by the smallest of tribulations, there had come this strange jealousy upon Sebastian's part. Strange; unmistakable. But that was over. It was over, forgotten. But for Lydia? Never forgotten. Nor did it warm her heart to think that he loved her enough to be jealous. It chilled her. She knew why. She knew it was because all the time, under his speech and under his common thoughts, he was haunted by one gnawing preoccupation—the fear of being old, of losing her to some other, younger man, of dying, of ending his days alone and uncared for.

If this had happened a year ago, it would have been quite different. Two years ago, it would have made her laugh. But now! What was there in her mind? There was a restlessness, a danger. It would pass. It would pass entirely away; and they would go on jogging along for the rest of their lives as they had done now for several years. Jogging along, happily. Getting old peacefully together, like Darby and Joan. Soon the shop would be closed, the business sold, and then they would settle down to a life of tranquil calm, unbroken by infelicity of any kind. Did she believe that?

"Oh, dear!" groaned Lydia, turning very quietly upon her

side. "No, I don't!" It was a wild cry, smothered in her hands.

She lay very still, breathing regularly in order to encourage sleep.

And that boy hadn't been in to see her since they had met in Parliament Hill Fields. He knew that Sebastian was generally away on Wednesdays; but he had not come. If he didn't come this Wednesday, it would be the third since she had seen him. The third. What if he was ill? What if he hadn't forgiven her for letting him speak out of his heart as he had done that day? That was probable enough. What if he never came again? That was quite possible. How would she like it? Her heart sank.

"I shouldn't like it," thought Lydia. "I should hate it." Like a stab, it came to her: "I couldn't bear it."

Suddenly her pulse fluttered. From Sebastian, as he lay near her in the half-light, had come a long, uncontrollable sigh. He was awake. For a long time after that Lydia lay perfectly still, listening, hardly daring to breathe.

II

In the long shafts of sunlight myriads of whirling motes spun and twisted. There was a noise of blusterous wind, which pushed the holland blind and made it tap back again upon the window-frame. Tack, tack . . . tack . . .

Hullo; that was odd! Was the sun as high as this? Lydia awoke, at first feeling heavy with sleep, but immediately afterwards becoming wakeful. Sunshine in the room: why, it must be late. She'd overslept. Sebastian?

He was not there. His bedclothes were thrown back; she could see the creased hollow where his head had rested. What, was he up! How quietly he must have slipped out of bed and dressed! Where was he? What would he think of her, lying there idly when there was work to be done? Shameful! She

sat upright in bed, her hands raised to her head; and that short sleeve of her nightdress slipped back into place. Golly, it *must* be late! Just hark to the traffic! In a trifling excitement, she jumped out of bed, and ran to the window, making no sound at all upon the woollen rugs. Well! The whole street was awake. She was the only sluggard! What on earth had happened?

With a grimace, Lydia turned to look at herself in the long mirror of the wardrobe door. Heavens, what a puffy face! Anybody seeing her thus would suppose that she had not slept at all. Or else that she did nothing all day but sleep! Oh, she was a bad woman; there was no question about it. She *looked* a bad woman, in her crumpled nightdress, the tips of her toes showing beneath its pale blue hem. And, as she reflected thus upon her own appearance, Lydia folded her arms. For her, the beauty of her white shoulders and the charm of her half-revealed body held no intoxication. Strangely enough, for this period in the world's history, Lydia did not delight in her own person. She was almost entirely free from physical vanity. But then she was not in love with herself. Far from that, indeed, at this moment.

"Whew! This breeze is a bit nippy!" she ejaculated.

Where was her dressing gown? She had just turned to pick it from the hook upon which it hung, when the door opened, and Sebastian peeped in. He looked straight at Lydia's bed; saw it to be empty; came silently into the room. In his hand was a cup of tea.

"Hey! hey! you'll make me spill it!" cried Sebastian, as Lydia, touched and affectionate, ran towards him. But he did not spill it. "It's late; and I've got to go round into Camden Road to see some stuff; and I didn't want to disturb you," he said.

The tea was horrible—exactly as Sebastian liked it;—both strong and stewed. But Lydia drank it without any sign that

it disgusted her, since this was an occasion for tact. And while she was drinking it she saw that Sebastian was wearing his best clothes—clothes, that is, which she had mended and pressed a dozen times, but which were coronation robes in comparison with the other suits he wore.

"Hm," said she. "Smart! The tie doesn't match, but still——"

"I've had breakfast," announced Sebastian. "My appointment's for eleven, and it's now a quarter to. So you'll have to make haste."

"Be off!" she cried. "I'll hurry."

"How d'you feel?" His eyes were searching.

"Grand!" said Lydia. She faced him down; and in doing so she realised that his anxiety, although very carefully concealed, was considerable. There was a darkness under his eyes; his lips looked rather blue; there was a general air of weariness.

"You want a holiday," Sebastian muttered.

"Out of this!" exclaimed Lydia. "Look at yourself! Besides, I'm tired of hearing it. You gimme the headache!"

With that she swept him from the room. In five minutes she heard, from his warning shout and from the sound of the electrifying bell at the shop door, that Sebastian was gone; and she had the bedroom door propped open in case the bell should ring again, to announce a customer.

As the bell was unlikely to ring at this hour, and as in fact it did not ring, Lydia proceeded to dress at leisure. And by the time she was dressed every trace of her troubled night and the too-heavy sleep which had followed it had disappeared. She stood erect in her workaday frock, as supple and as slim as ever; and presently descended the staircase on her way to the kitchen, treading carefully—but unconsciously—among the oddments with which the stairs were littered, and inhaling the odour of decay without being aware of it. Halfway down the

stairs she encountered the broad wave of sunlight which had already penetrated the shop window, and was warmed by its genial heat. More than warmed—encouraged. Then she passed onward, until she came to the foot of the stairs.

And as she arrived at the foot of the stairs, some impulse prompted her to go to the door of the shop, open it, step out, and pull-to the door behind her, so that the sound of that tearing bell should not make hideous the echoes of the whole house. If she had not done this, she would have missed Ambrose, who was hurrying past with his eyes averted.

"Good-morning!" called Lydia, quickly.

Had he not heard? It seemed that he had not. He was alone, and his head was down, and he was walking with his long plunging stride, which was made the more peculiar by the fact that as he walked he held his right shoulder forward and his right arm rigid. But as Lydia's heart stopped beating he looked back, barely lifted his hat, and passed on.

What! Wasn't he going to speak to her? And his expression! He was as white as chalk, and the single glance he had given was one of bitter accusation. So might a man look at a mistress who had wronged him. A moment later he was lost among the loitering human beings who are always to be seen in the streets of a town. He was lost, and Lydia was alone.

She fumbled behind her for the door, and pushed it open. She was once more within the shop; and stood, as white as Ambrose had been, her legs trembling. What had he meant? What had she done? There had been nothing that Saturday to account for such a glance. There had been nothing since.

"*Couldn't* have been!" whispered Lydia, wonderingly. She felt quite sick with shock. Her hands were raised slowly until they touched and were forced rigidly against her lips. "What have I done?" she thought. "What have I done? What's he looking like that for?" So great was her power of self-control that she walked rather dully to the back of the shop, to Sebas-

tian's corner, and sat down as if she were stupefied. A sob rose in her throat, to be checked. Tears sprang to her eyes, and made them smart; but she blinked, staring straight before her. If she had yielded for an instant, she must have given way to a fit of slow, helpless crying. Instead, with her lips pressed together, and her whole body shuddering, she struggled for composure.

III

Presently another mood came. At first the sense of shock and grief gave way to indignation that she should be so summarily treated by one for whom she had felt nothing but kindness. Then she began to remember how he had flung out of the shop upon an earlier occasion, and how he had explained during their walk the causes of this impetuous flight. He would return. He would explain. Of course he was bound to do so. Of course. She told herself this over and over again, reassuringly. And meanwhile she must not allow her mind to dwell upon a trifle, an accident. It was nothing—nothing, she was sure. But how imperious he was! How fitful! Just so, she thought, must Kings and Shahs and Emperors be—kind one moment, and severe the next. They had favourites; and the favourites were beheaded. Wives and mistresses; and the mistresses were discarded. Even the wives gave way to the mistresses, and at last—— Yes, but to *her!* What had she done? She wasn't used to such treatment. She wouldn't endure it from anybody on earth. Why, you wouldn't treat somebody who'd *deceived* you—— Anger grew again; but anger was once more succeeded by excuse. She was making altogether too much of it. He had not meant to hurt her. How *could* he mean to hurt her? Besides, supposing he meant it, what did it matter? She hadn't any right to complain, or to feel hurt. None. None at all. She was nothing.

"I'm nobody," thought Lydia. "Nobody that matters."

And, as she told herself that, arrogance swelled again. Was she nobody? Nobody, perhaps, in her own eyes; but the greater you were the less you injured the feelings of those who were nothing. You didn't insult them or humiliate them. Only small men did that. Small men and women.

"And it's not as if I'd *done* anything wrong," she continued. "Well, what *have* I done?"

Then she bit her lip, for that violent shuddering had seized her again, and she was upon the verge of tears.

"Oh, shut *up!*" she whispered. "*That's* no good! Idiot! Why can't you get on with your work—forget it—forget everything?" Gaspingly, she added: "I shouldn't mind so much if I'd *done* something. Then I'd have known I deserved it. But to have the *two* of them——"

Her lips puckered; a sob shook her. She rested her forehead upon the backs of her hands as they held the end of the broom-handle. Never had she felt so desolate or so unhappy.

IV

Ting-ting-trrring! Lydia had been sweeping the kitchen. The mere sound of that bell caused her to sit down suddenly in one of the rough Windsor chairs by the table. She was weak with dread. Who was it? Was it Ambrose? She didn't want him to see her like this. He'd despise her. She didn't want *anybody* to see her like this. They'd think she was a poor feeble-witted creature who suffered from the vapours! The kind of woman whom she hated. Who could it be? There was no call from Sebastian or Mrs. Way. Oh, dear! She must wearily climb the stairs and give her mind to this new question. Her feet were like lead. Her legs still trembled.

It was not Ambrose who waited above, but an elderly man with a hard, clean-shaven face. Lydia had never seen him before. He was dressed in a cut-away morning coat and a silk

hat, and was very thin and tall, his shoulders somewhat bowed, his mouth coarse with much speaking. As he stepped about the shop he leant heavily upon an ivory-handled umbrella, and his hands were hidden in black kid gloves. A gentleman, evidently, though he had something the air of a tax-collector, or one who cheapens second-hand furniture before buying it. Big grey eyebrows rolled above hard eyes. Lydia, meeting those eyes, stiffened instinctively. She did not like this man; she would be glad when he was gone. However:

"Good-morning," said she, civilly. He ignored the greeting.

"Are you the keeper of this shop?" asked the man.

"My husband is," returned Lydia.

"Is he here?" The man listened to her explanation, not looking directly at her, but scrutinising her from the corners of his eyes. "Half-an-hour, you say? Is he generally here? All day long? Do you help him? You're not here very much, then? I thought you might be." To all these sharp inquiries Lydia replied quietly. She was not going to be frightened by such a tone. "Do you understand these things?" He jerked his head to indicate the objects with which the shop was strewn.

"What did you want to know about them?" demanded Lydia, with steel in her voice.

His eyes narrowed. But he did not answer her question.

"Who *is* he?" thought Lydia. "Police? Perhaps he's a magistrate."

The man turned aside, ostensibly to examine the few books which stood upon some shelves; but as Lydia immediately perceived his real object was to observe herself. She was not angered by his rudeness: shopkeepers must not be too sensitive to bad manners. But she did not propose to submit to such scrutiny; and so she walked towards the back of the shop.

"How much is this?" asked the man, with the object of keeping her near him.

Lydia examined the small label upon the base of an eighteenth century silver jug which he held out to her. The man had already turned negligently away.

"Three pounds ten," she told him, waiting. As no answer came, and as he kept his back to her, she was again going, when he recalled her.

"That's too much," he said. "I'll give you a pound."

Lydia set down the jug, smiling.

"Oh, no," she answered. "We don't bargain like that here."

"Nonsense. You mean *you* don't. Your husband does, no doubt."

Lydia said nothing. Still she was not angered.

"Why don't you answer?"

"Because there's nothing to answer," Lydia said.

He was surprised at her calmness: a dry smile distorted still further that ugly mouth.

"Come, I'll give you thirty shillings," he said. "What?"

"The price is three pounds ten," replied Lydia. "We don't bargain here."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"You will, in the end," Lydia said. "When you either pay the money or go out without it."

"I shan't pay more than thirty shillings. Come, you'd better take that. No?" He went toward the door. Lydia watched his movements as if fascinated. When he had his hand upon the door, the man turned, to see the effect of his retreat. Lydia felt such pleasure in his going that she was still standing, her face lighted with hope. But he did not go. Instead, he took a few steps back towards her.

"So you don't bargain, eh?" he asked. His manner had changed. He had imported something jaunty into it, as if to encourage her. "You're the first dealer I've met in this sort of ware who doesn't. It's quite a treat. I'll look round and see if

there's anything else I need. This screen here, for example. It would keep the draughts away from an old man like myself."

"It's got the price on it," Lydia said, indicating a ticket. "It's a pound."

The visitor grunted.

"Yes, but is it *worth* a pound?" he questioned.

"It's well worth it, sir," said Lydia. "It's old enough to look well, and new enough to keep the draughts off."

"Too old. Too old. That's what I am. You don't exert yourself to please elderly customers in this shop, eh?"

"Oh, dear!" groaned Lydia, to herself. "I wish he'd go!" Politely, she answered: "Most of our customers are—well, they're grown up. Some of them quite old. They all get the same treatment."

"No bargains?"

"They *all* get bargains. Not the kind you mean."

"What kind do I mean?"

"Something tricky, I think."

He gave a rough laugh. It was a grunt, followed by another grunt.

"Yes," he mused. "Something tricky." His mind seemed to be busy. He was standing with his back half-turned to Lydia; but in the silence he gave her a very searching look. "You're a pretty woman," he said, unexpectedly. "Don't *you* ever make bargains?"

"Never," answered Lydia, in a steady tone.

"Hardly ever? If some pretty boy——" He was watching her more narrowly than ever. But Lydia did not flinch. She was not likely now, when she was on guard, to flush. Besides, she'd give him a lesson. He wasn't going to be impudent to *her*. Nasty old man!

"We'll wait until that happens," she said, coolly. "You can't answer for what you *might* do, can you?"

"Can't you?" He was smiling again, with that ugly, dis-

torted smile. It was a cruel smile, and his face remained hard. Lydia could see now that his eyes were close together. They were a light grey, and there was a quizzical bitterness in them.

"I should have thought you could. Come, it's not so difficult to guess. I've seen something of the world, and one learns a little." He grunted again. He was laughing. Laughing and watching her as if he believed in no sincerity and no virtue. Lydia did not say anything more, but returned smile for smile, her own less hard than his, but at the most no more than the merest plucking apart of the lips.

They stood thus for perhaps half a minute. At the end of that time Lydia's attention was distracted by a movement outside the door of the shop. Past this man's arm, she could see two figures, one of them short, the other tall. They were the figures of Sebastian and Ambrose. Sebastian was smiling jovially, as if at his most anecdotal, while Ambrose, as pale as ever, with an expression upon his face that was almost one of bored horror, was evidently trying to escape from some invitation to enter the shop. He was pulling away, while Sebastian had one hand upon his sleeve, and the other, half open, outstretched towards the shop.

Watching the two, and in particular Ambrose, Lydia forgot the stranger. Her heart was moved. It began to beat more rapidly. Her lips were parted; colour came to her cheeks. She wondered if Sebastian would persuade Ambrose to enter. She wondered what Ambrose would say and do if he came in and saw her. Apparently he would not come. He was speaking—making some excuse—looking wretchedly ill and unhappy. While Sebastian was smiling, and, when his invitation was refused, looking straight up into the face of Ambrose, as if in the effort to discover a truer reason for refusal than the one offered.

No. He would not come. Lydia's face grew grave. Her lips closed together again. She saw Sebastian make one last effort,

waving his hand within (she could feel almost sure, from the movement of his lips, that he had said "my wife"); saw Ambrose grow very red and tear himself away, and move at a rapid pace along the street, while Sebastian, the smile fading, stood watching him. Unconsciously, Lydia allowed her head to fall forward. Her nostrils were pinched; her hands had come nervously together, and were clasped before her breast; her eyes were half-closed.

Only then did she become aware that the tall, elderly man was still in the shop; that he had seen what she had seen; and that he was carefully scrutinising her from under those thick white brows. He was not smiling now, but was standing very still, concealed from those without by the doorpost and the comparative darkness of the shop.

CHAPTER NINE: AN ENCOUNTER

I

A LETTER came by the afternoon post, and Sebastian brought it downstairs when he came for his tea. Both of them recognised the thin handwriting upon the envelope—the style of one who does not send many letters, and whose pen is alternately dry and clogged with the quaggish residue from a little-used ink-bottle. "Mrs. Rowe, c/o Sebastian Rowe Esqre," said the envelope. Her mother's characteristic manner of address! The envelope lay beside Lydia's plate while she filled Sebastian's cup. She felt disinclined to open it, for her head ached and her heart ached, and she felt that she had no spirit left for anything. Sebastian, on the contrary, was especially jovial, and was making little sounds in his throat which were akin to the pleased greetings of an affectionate cat. "Hm, hm, hm," said he, grinning affably. For once Lydia had no comment to offer. In silence she held out his cup. Her foot secretly tapped the floor.

At last:

"What's the old lady got to say?" demanded Sebastian, taking a large bite from a rock cake.

Giving his inquiry only half her attention, Lydia took up the letter; but even then she did not open the envelope. Her eyes saw nothing: they were fixed as if in paralysis.

"I feel half-dead," she murmured, without knowing that she had spoken. Nor did she hear his concerned cry. She was by now tearing at the common paper, and blindly watching the moving blur of her mother's spiky writing. At first she could not understand the words: when she did so a heavy sigh parted her lips. Lydia groaned. That which she had dreaded had indeed occurred.

MY DEAR LYDIA. Your dad has been discharged by his firm to take effect at the end of the month. I do not know what we shall do I am very worried. He does not seem able to eat anything and is very miserable I do not think he know what to do himself and only hope you or Sebastian can think of something there is no money except what is due to him end of the month we do not owe anything thank God but that is the end of his Mercy for I just do not know where we are to turn. Your dad say there is no good doing or saying anything, but that is just his fedupness and I am writing you these few lines to let you know. If you can find time to come in and see me I am all alone these days for your dad goes out and does not come home until late more tired than ever. He is out now and I shall run to the post and do some shopping and then go to bed as I am not too well with this worry and a cold I think may be the Flue. Hoping this finds you and your husband well. Your affectionate Mother, CHARLOTTE COTTAR.

Without a word, Lydia threw the letter over to Sebastian, and sat back in her chair. Her tea was untasted; a little paleness was beginning to gather upon its surface. She closed her eyes. With a start, she opened them again, for Sebastian had whistled, and was passing his hand through his hair, making it stand upon end as it would have done if he had been strolling hatless in the wind.

"Poor old souls," Sebastian was ejaculating. "What's all this about his losing his job? I didn't know. You never tell me anything, you know, Lydia. I knew nothing of this."

"I didn't want to worry you about it," answered Lydia. "Besides, I didn't know, myself."

"Why's he lost his job? No orders? Well, they couldn't expect them, with that stuff. He'd have lost his job in any case, when they wound up the business. Any savings? No insurance, I suppose. He's not the kind. Hm. Yes, well, what's to be done, eh?" He caressed his chin. Behind the mask of his face

(for if Sebastian chose not to show his thoughts he could always conceal them, Lydia knew, by means of a completely blank, or rueful, expression), he was thinking quickly. The little flicker in his eyes showed how his mind was working with the speed of a swallow's flight. But at the end of a short interval he shook his head. His eyes were dull again. Lydia did not need to be told that Sebastian had thought of everything—and of nothing that would serve.

"I'll go and see them," she said, wearily.

"Bit depressing," commented Sebastian. "I shouldn't go. Not to-day. Leave it. You're not in a fit state to go. I'll run round myself."

"You jolly well *won't!*" cried Lydia, roused by his words. "No, they're *my* troubles, not yours."

"What's yours is mine!" he laughed. "And what's mine's my own. Where troubles are concerned. It's the same everywhere. There's a curious thing, you know, the way people—and animals—hide when they're in trouble. We don't wear our troubles in our caps; only our triumphs. All the same, I can't see you cheering her up much at the moment. Better let me go. No? When did she write this? Last night? This morning? No date, of course. Marvellous! Saturday, probably. Oh, Saturday sure: 'He is out now,' she says, as if he wasn't at work. 'And I shall do some shopping.' 'You know my methods, Watson.' That means it's a day he ought to be at home; and yet not Sunday. One thing, it's not Winter, so it's not so bad as it might be. He'll get something, won't he? Oh, we'll find something for him to do. We'll find something—somehow."

Lydia shook her head. She was too tired to argue with Sebastian; but in her heart she was sure that nothing would ever be found for her father to do. He was too old, too cantankerous; and if he was not eating anything he was probably spending what money he had upon drink.

As if Sebastian had been following her reflections, he returned to the letter, and read from it, in an undertone:

" 'He does not seem able to eat anything' . . . 'does not come home until late.' " More loudly, he asked: "What does she mean?" He cocked a shrewd eye upon Lydia as he spoke. "Any idea?"

"Beer," said Lydia, laconically. "That's what she means. Poor old thing, he doesn't have more than a glass or two of beer, and it makes him stupid. Then he goes home, and finds her dull, and goes to sleep. There's a pair of them sitting there, as dull as ditch-water, till bedtime. But it's got nothing to do with what's happened with his firm. At least, I don't *think* it has. He's all right till he's tired."

"Hm," said Sebastian, ruffling his hair again. "These old boys—— I wonder——" He laughed—not a real laugh, but a sort of pseudo-jovial "Huh!"—and scanned the letter again. "If your Dad was a great man—a Dostoevsky, say—that letter would be valuable in another hundred years."

"And as he's not, it won't," corrected Lydia. "And a hundred years is no good, either."

"True." Sebastian was uncrushed. "Neither the one nor the other; nor yet the hundred years. And yet it's a good letter. Why the devil *isn't* your father a great man, Lydia? I ask you. He ought to be. But he's not. Nothing could make him a great man. What's the difference between a great man and a small man? Ever wondered? It's a mystery to me. Where's the line drawn? And *how's* it drawn? Who draws it? There's plenty of small great men walking about to-day, and always have been. And plenty of men—your Goldsmiths, your Hardys—cutting no personal figure, in spite of their greatness. Simply because they were modest. But that's not the whole thing. Contrariwise. I'm small and modest, myself; and yet I'm not a great man. I'm a small man doing small things in a small way. And

nobody thinks I'm anything else—though sometimes I wonder if we aren't all mistaken about me. Perhaps a great man *manqué*. And come to that, I reckon I've got as much right to exist as anybody else. What d'you say to that, then? Eh?"

Lydia was not listening to his bravado, delivered with an air of whimsy, and in reality with the object of distracting her thoughts from the letter. Sebastian had flourished his hand as he spoke; but she had not seen the hand, just as she had not heard the words, because she had recovered her mother's letter and in a miserable way was reading it through a second time.

" 'I just do not know where we are to turn,' " whispered Lydia, reading the words to herself. Neither of those poor things knew. Dad didn't, that was certain. And that was why he was drinking. Two useless people. No more use in the world, and so the world dismissed them. They were old; nobody wanted them. When you were old, you were only valued if you had some money to leave or give. Money. That was all people thought of. If you hadn't any money, nobody took any notice of you. "I'd rather put an end to myself," thought Lydia, suddenly. "If nobody wanted me, and if they showed it, I'd rather put an end to myself—if I could find a way—than live neglected, sponging on other people, that gave unwillingly and grudgingly—rudely . . ."

The letter fell from her fingers, as though it had become heavy with the weight of its message.

II

She was not, however, to visit her mother that evening, for while they were still seated at the tea table they heard a violent clattering of footsteps across the iron grating in the pavement, and then more sounds of running, and finally the hissing of rain. So fierce was the first onset of the rain that great drops showered in at the open window, some of them leaping

—he declared—upon Sebastian's head, so that he was forced to jump up and shut the window, which was immediately streaming with water. The room grew very dark. Thereafter there was no sound but a dreary splashing in the area and the whistling noise of the gutter-pipes. A smell of dampness filled the air, and a shuddering chill descended. Useless to try and walk through such a storm. All that Lydia could do was to wait until the rain ceased, and by that time it was too late to think of making the excursion.

Nor was the next day more fortunate, for Sebastian had caught a chill, and he stayed in bed all through a dark, rainy, and wretched twenty-four hours. It was therefore not until the third day after receiving her mother's letter that Lydia, making light of a less boisterous rain, left him in a chair drawn up close to the kitchen fire, a sale-catalogue in his hands, the door of the shop fastened, some cigarettes (which he would not smoke) and some matches upon the table beside him, and the whisky (which he would not drink) within easy reach. She had come down into the fugg of the over-heated atmosphere, and had found Sebastian with his elbow propped upon the arm of the chair, deep in thought. The fire had glowed; his smile, wistful but not self-pitying, had greeted her; the glance she had given to the table had shown that everything he might need was close at hand. A moment later she had been in the wind, and had felt the rain upon her cheeks. It was still light. There were long reflections upon the wet pavements. The gutters chinkled as she walked. The wheels of every car that passed sent great spurts of water from the roadway and caused a slushing noise. But Lydia did not care. She was out-of-doors, and alone. Alone, with innumerable flitting points of light and shadow to distract her attention from the thoughts which, indoors, could not be escaped.

It was a long walk through the streets, but there was exhilaration in this journey; for presently lights began to shine

from the shop windows, sending out great fiery fingers across her path, and the reflections became innumerable. Lydia's cheeks, warmed by the exercise, and wetted by the rain, were soon glowing, and her eyes became first clear and then starry. Unconsciously she walked more erectly, fronting the damp breeze, a tall, straight figure in her white mackintosh and black felt hat, short-skirted, stoutly-booted, moving quickly and easily through the half-deserted streets.

She forgot all her troubles, as if she had been a child. It was as if she had no troubles at all. And indeed, as she had reminded herself several times during the preceding days, she had no real troubles. All were imaginary. Yet they nagged her. They were little memories of Sebastian, little memories of Ambrose, ceaseless speculations. Above all, there was something from which her mind recoiled. And there was this problem of Ambrose. Always there was the problem of Ambrose and his extraordinary behaviour. How odd, how inexplicable that was! How it hurt her!

"I expect he's fallen in love with me," Lydia had thought —long ago. "It's his way of showing it!" She had laughed at that: she laughed no longer.

Who had the elderly man been who was so rude to her? He had left the shop as soon as Sebastian had parted from Ambrose, had brushed past Sebastian, had walked quickly away in the opposite direction to that which Ambrose had taken. The little silver jug for which he had bargained—not sincerely, she now thought, but only with the intention of making her angry and confused—had been still there. Nothing had been missing. And he had not again visited the shop. Perhaps he had been mad? If so, perhaps he had wanted to kill her? What silly nonsense! But, all the same, perhaps Sebastian's return had been lucky for her.

All these thoughts were blown away by the wind. As she went upon her way, Lydia recalled days from her childhood,

when she had run errands in this neighbourhood, and had met other girls of her own age, and played hop-scotch with them, and schools, and mothers-and-fathers. They had had hoops, also; and at home she had played with dolls. Not out-of-doors with dolls. She had been to a board school. She could still hear the lessons being chanted upon just such a day as this has been. And Miss Palgrave . . . "Girls, you *must* be *quieter!*" Lottie Mason had had a letter from a boy, and Miss Palgrave had seen the letter as it was being shown by Lottie to a friend. "Who *is* this Clarence?" Miss Palgrave had contemptuously demanded, with a kind of snort. That snort had been much imitated in play hours. Happy days. Were they so happy? Now that she came to ask herself the question, Lydia did not feel that they had been very happy. Young days, it might be; and everybody supposed that young days were happy days. But the happiest days she had ever had were those of the first six months following her marriage.

"Twenty-seven," thought Lydia, soberly.

A red omnibus was passing, and its sides glittered brightly. She had a vision of the driver, hunched up behind his tarpaulin apron, and the vague outlines of passengers behind those misty windows, and the conductor standing upon his platform, smirking cheerfully at her in spite of his depressing day in the wet, and the smell of mackintoshes, and the purse-fumblings of old ladies. What a life it was!

She was in Holloway Road now. In a moment she would be in Grove Road, at the end of which that accident had nearly occurred from which old Rasputin had saved her. Ugh! It wasn't so cheerful here! Lydia's spirits began to sink, in response to her surroundings. She was forgetful now of her school days, and of mildly happy memories. She no longer thought of Sebastian's amusing innocence in the second-hand shops during their honeymoon, or of the days when his little outbursts of philosophising seemed to her to be fresh and odd.

The end of the journey was approaching. Her steps were slower, less buoyant. She lowered her head. The houses reared, frowning, above her. In ten minutes, at the outside, she would be with her mother, in that nest of gloom, listening to the dirge of her father's misfortunes and of his "tiredness" and of the dead future.

"Oh, Lor'!" groaned Lydia. "If I was only—!" What? Did she mean "rich," or "kind," or "resourceful"? She did not know. Perhaps all three. Or perhaps only "happy." For it seemed to her at this moment that she had reached the end of one part of her life, and that as yet the new chapter had not opened; and there was no doubt at all that with the ending of the earlier part she had come to something like a dead end. "Discontented duffer!" she said to herself. "You ought to be *ashamed!*" And so, it may be, she was.

III

Hornsey Road! The Public Baths were down there to the right; Tollington Park, where that old woman had been slowly murdered, it was said, by arsenic soaked from fly-papers, was over there; and up to the left, over the half-hearted shop that changed hands every few months, were her father and mother. Lydia could picture them in the dingy half-light, sitting dozing, afraid, ashamed. . . . Her mother would feel a sense of injury against her for having been so long in coming; but when she heard that the cause had been Sebastian's illness her face would lengthen. Lydia knew. She knew that to her mother Sebastian was the one hope.

It became more and more difficult to walk. She was dawdling, as she had done as a little girl when punishment lay ahead.

"Come on, pull yourself together!" cried Lydia, seeing through her own manœuvres. And with that she stepped out

sharply, swung in at the open door beside the shop where artists' materials were exhibited, ran up the stairs—and stopped abruptly when she was half way up.

Who on earth was *that?* Through the air came the sound of a voice, talking. It was a voice wholly unfamiliar to Lydia, a rather deep voice, the voice of a man. It kept on and on, monotonously, meaninglessly. What was it saying? Good heavens! A visitor? A bore? Who had the old dear got talking to her? Poor old thing: some good worker, probably, delivering a lecture on resignation! Sounded like a sermon. Hullo, he'd stopped. Lydia, still half way up the dark stairs, held the stair-rail and listened intently. She supposed that her mother was talking now, for she could hear nothing. Answering questions, very likely. That was what it was! The vicar had come to call, and was now hearing all the details of Dad's job, and his teeth, and his being tired in the evening. Etcetera. Lydia hoped he'd like it. What sauce to come at this time of day, and talk like that to Mother! Oom-oom-oom. However, Mother could keep on pretty well, thanks, when she had the floor. Pretty well. And it was her innings, evidently. The visitor hadn't a word to say. He didn't even interrupt. He was listening. Do him good! That would teach him to come talking platitudes about "that station in life" and being good, and accepting your trials. Evidently Dad was out, or *he'd* have had a word to say. Silence! It was uncanny. Should she go on? It seemed the only thing to do. But just as Lydia set her foot upon the next step, preparing to mount, the man's voice began afresh. Oom-oom-oom—exactly as before. Good gracious! Once he was wound up, he went on like a canvasser with something to sell that he knew you didn't want. Sick wife, seventeen children, not a single order, must take an order back, or there'd be nothing for all those hungry mouths . . .

Canvasser! Perhaps it *was* a canvasser! Golly, he'd come to the wrong shop to sell anything. Oom-oom-oom. The voice

swelled out sonorously, as if it were repeating a lesson. Lydia had never in all her life heard a voice like that. There was no checking the man. His voice positively echoed. He must be the world's most un-refuse-able canvasser. And Mum sitting there in a stupor, listening to him, unable to get rid of the old nuisance. Mousy quiet!

Hey, this had to be stopped! Lydia crept up the stairs, her steps quite drowned in that sententious roll of words. Even when one of the stairs creaked, she hardly heard it; and she was upon the landing from which the two doors opened before the speaker paused for breath. Again there was a silence. She listened. From within it *did* seem as if her mother were saying something. Then another voice spoke. What! Dad *was* there, then! There was no doubt of it. The third voice was certainly his, a sort of muttering, as if the poor old man were completely cowed. And no wonder! Anybody would be cowed by a flow of words like that. She must go in and stop it. She *must*.

Whatever qualm Lydia may have felt was checked by a movement of horror. For the other voice had begun again, in the same authoritative tone, speaking slowly, firmly, and without a pause. In desperation, feeling as if she led a charge like that of the Light Brigade at Balaklava, Lydia knocked loudly at the door of her parents' sitting-room, turned the handle, and walked in.

The room was unlighted. In the dusk of that rainy evening they had closed the windows, and were economising gas by sitting in the darkness. Her mother sat with her back to the window, dressed in the high-necked black frock with a little white at the collar which she always wore. Dad was in his armchair, not leaning back, and not asleep, as was usual, but well forward, his knees supporting his elbows, and his chin resting upon his two hands. Before him, lying open, upon another chair, lay a book upon which his glazed eyes were

solemnly fixed. Both Tom and Charlotte were in deadly earnest. They were listening to the sonorous voice. Lydia, dumb with astonishment (for they were unconscious of her entry, and did not look up), heard incomprehensible words being spoken—words she had never heard before, words that conveyed no meaning to her—uttered by the unquenchable voice:

"Le petit garçon et la petite fille courent embrasser leur cousin et leur cousine. L'oncle tient la niece par la main . . ."

But where was the speaker? Lydia burst out laughing. And although she laughed the succulent voice took no notice, but continued with the same distinct and arbitrary unction:

"Le neveu est le cousin de la petite fille——"

The voice was coming from a small gramophone which stood near Tom's right hand upon the solid dining-table. It was a grand voice, and its enunciation was glorious. But the words conveyed no meaning to Lydia. She could only recognise, now that she was in the room, that they were spoken in a foreign tongue; and could only guess that this tongue must be that of her father's *bête noir*, the French nation.

"Well!" shouted Lydia. "Did you ever!"

She closed the door behind her, and stood within, a brilliant figure in that dusky room, with her white mackintosh gleaming. But her shout was no trump to these students. Muttering to himself, Tom jerked in his chair, and looked indignantly round, scowling. Mum also looked up, as one who awakens from a dream of purl and plain. She gave a faint smile at sight of Lydia, shook her head, put her finger to her lips. That large white face then immediately returned to its former calm. Never previously had Lydia been so coldly received by her mother. And as if he felt that some effort at greeting was due from himself, Tom also descended from Olympus, raised his left hand slightly in the air, said one word, and continued absorbedly listening to the rich voice of the gramophone. Lydia was thunderstruck.

"Pardon!" said Tom. He pronounced the word with a French accent.

IV

There were tears in Lydia's eyes as she looked from one to the other of those two intent figures, her mother with her eyes closed, as one entranced, her father with his prominent nose seeming to glow with fervour. How rapt they were! They might have been listening to Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" itself, or the adagio from Mozart's Quintette in G Minor. They might have been listening to a new gospel of peace and happiness. How still they were! How sunk in oblivion of all customary things! It grew darker, but they ignored the darkness. They cared only for knowledge. And at last the record ended. Two great sighs broke the silence. With clumsy scrupulousness, Tom checked the turntable and rose to his feet, with the object of greeting Lydia. As he did so, limping suddenly, he stooped and began heatedly to rub the calf of his left leg. That brown, melancholy, depressed face broke into a rather sheepish grin.

"Leg's gone to sleep," he muttered.

"What is it?" demanded Lydia, pointing to the gramophone, and going across to her mother.

"French," answered her mother, in the tone of one who reprovingly says: "Don't you *know?*" And yet also, subtly, in the tone of one who is filled with monstrous pride in accomplishment. An unctuous tone.

"Thought you didn't like the French," said Lydia. "You always said so."

There was no reply. Both her parents smiled—but a little awkwardly.

"Changed, haven't you?" asked Lydia. "And Dad with his 'pardon.' "

"Well," hesitated Tom. He glanced at Charlotte, and grinned again. "Well——"

There was a long pause. Perhaps they were still dreaming? Perhaps their lips still silently moved, saying, "Le neveu est le cousin de la petite fille?"

"Got shy, haven't you?" prompted Lydia. "Who gave you *that?*"

"Oh, Lydia, it's *wonderful!*" said her mother, shaking her head and swallowing. With a half-raised hand of appeal, she glanced at her husband. "*You* tell her, Dad."

"No, *you* tell her," grumbled Tom. "Want me to do *all* the talking?" He cleared his throat.

Lydia was filled with suspicion at this hesitancy. What had the two old images been up to?

"You'll tell me next you've been to the pictures!" she proclaimed. "Going every night. Have you? Been fiddling while Rome burns, like old Nebuchadnezzar?"

No; that was evidently a poor guess. There was no response, no hint of furtive guilt in the demeanour of the two. The mystery lay elsewhere. But where? Completely baffled, Lydia stamped her foot. From neither of these two simpering faces could she get any enlightenment.

"Mind you," Tom said, decidedly. "I haven't admitted anything. Not anything, have I, Mum?" He appealed to his wife. "I'm still of the same opinion. I still say, for all his talk of 'foyer'—which is what *we* call the place where you go into a theatre; and that pretty well gives it away, I mean . . . There's prob'ly good French and bad French, clean French and—well, not so clean, we'll call it. And it may be that it's hardly fair to refer to all foreigners as 'dirty.' I quite see that. I'm not unreasonable. I never *was*. And I was always willing to make allowances. . . . After all, I'm English; and I naturally prefer my own countrymen. But I admit there's

other nations; and I say nothing, one way or the other, either for or against the French——"

"But you're learning it," suggested Lydia.

He took no notice of the interjection.

"I keep an open mind. I shall see for myself. No prejudice, no hasty feelings, no unkind memories of the war. Peace, brotherliness—and a sharp eye. That's what I say, a sharp eye on the change; but no offence given or taken. You see what I mean, Lydia?"

He paused, his lips again parted in that odd, half-human smile, his head cocked with an air that was both ingratiating and condescending.

"I see," answered Lydia. "And very nice, too. But what you going to do when you've learnt all about nervers and nee-aces? That's what I want to know."

"Well, we're *going* to France," said her mother, plainly. "That's what. Going there to live."

Lydia reached round for a chair, and sat smartly down in it.

"You're *what?*" she cried. "Fan me!"

Although she jested, the news gave Lydia a pang. More than that, it made her feel that her world was suddenly unsettled. The sensation was extraordinary. It was more: it was incredible. She didn't believe it. The white mackintosh, which she had folded neatly and laid where raindrops could do no harm, slid unnoticed to the floor. What a dream she was having!

And yet, now that she looked again, these two middle-aged people were quite altered. Her father, wearing the same clothes as before, looked smarter; with the same shabby face as before, he was animated by a different set of thoughts. He was no longer crushed, but had a slightly crestfallen air of mystery, of romance. His eyes protruded, his nose was bulbous; but the eyes were alight, and the very nose, she could almost

persuade herself, twinkled with suppressed excitement. He opened his mouth more widely; he smiled; there was something sly and triumphant in his demeanour, as if secrets were gathered about his heart and were knowingly conned by a mind freshly charged with eagerness. Not an old man any longer, he looked about the room with the critical eye of one who would change this and that. If he had been able, earlier, to enter a stationers' shop with such a swagger, he must have emptied his bag and filled his order sheets. Or, if that was altogether too extravagant a fancy, he could at least have left the shop with his colours flying, and not (as she had gathered from his earlier style of conversation) upon all fours, following his bag.

Her mother, too, was unlike the Mum of the previous week. She had more dignity. Though she sat in very nearly the same attitude as before, she did it without listlessness. There was nothing dispirited about her. She might inwardly be apprehensive, but she was outwardly calm. Upon her round white face had appeared some of the pride and self-confidence which Lydia associated with portraits of Queen Victoria. Now that she came to look closely at Mum, indeed, she saw that there was a positive resemblance to Queen Victoria, not ridiculous or caricatured, but admirable. And as she realised this Lydia began to beam, then to smile, and finally to laugh.

"Who's done it?" she demanded. "Who put you up to all this? It's not your own idea, is it?"

"No," answered Tom. "You're quite right. It's my friend Mr. Gerard."

"First I've heard of him," protested Lydia. "Friend, did you say?"

"I'll explain," Tom said. "May as well, eh, Mum?" He walked over to the fireplace and as he walked, and as he stood there, Lydia noticed how differently he held himself. Why, he was quite tall when he stood up like this! And he'd had his

hair cut! No wonder he looked smarter! Standing with his back to the empty grate (in front of which, however, Charlotte always kept a peculiar contrivance that was like a colossal paper fan), Tom first of all coughed. Lydia knew then that he was not as calm as he pretended to be. Nay, the old darling was excited. And so he ought to be! she exclaimed impulsively to herself. "It's like this, you see, Lydia. In the course of my . . ." He hesitated. "Well, I've been in the habit of stepping round to a little house near here—the Duke of St. Albans, in fact—in the evening. There's no harm in that, I suppose. A man's entitled to take a little——"

"Go on, Dad," cried Lydia. "Anybody'd think you were ashamed."

"Sh, Lydia!" whispered her mother. "Your Dad's talking."

Tom was slightly confused by the interruption. He rocked to and fro upon his heels and toes, less jauntily. For a moment the new lift of his shoulders disappeared. Lydia had a cautionary glimpse of her father as he had been a week earlier. She was reminded of his crawling pace, the angle at which his too-large hat had been worn, the stupid, sleepy, quarrelsome, cowed air he had worn, his solemnity and his self-defensive condemnations of his stock-in-trade. The glimpse was horrifying.

"Sorry," breathed Lydia. "Carry on, Dad!"

"In fact, one evening I noticed a man beside me . . . a gentleman; and we talked a bit, and we got on so well that, to cut a long story short, he walked back here with me. In the course of conversation, I happened to mention that I wasn't very comfortable where I was. Told him the whole story, in fact. I put it to him—— He quite saw my position. He said a number of kind things. Very sympathetic. The upshot of it was, that we met again. He was just the same, asked me some questions and we got talking about France . . . the French. He asked me—well, I told him my views. He agreed they were reasonable. Well, they were. I didn't mince

matters. I spoke my mind. I said what I felt about the Debt question, about their habits——"

"I bet you did," whispered Lydia. "About the wives and bath-towels——" But the words were spoken to herself, and they remained unheard by the orator.

"He quite saw my point of view. Then it turned out that he had lived a good deal in France. In fact he's got a house there now. He just told me that. He didn't say anything for a long time of what he had in mind. Then he found out that I'd—been forced to send in my resignation, to take effect at the end of the month; and before I quite knew what was happening he was asking me if I'd consider the idea of living in France. At first I said, 'No.' Very decidedly. Like *that*. But Mr. Gerard is a very persuasive sort of man, and he told me just how *he* felt about it. Finally I brought him back to see your mother——"

"I'd just gone to bed!" interpolated Charlotte, with a faint smile.

"Yes, but he was very nice about that," remarked Tom.

"I got up again," said Charlotte. "I got quite a shock. Your Dad came in full of fuss and business——"

"Well, it was all new to me. And as for fuss—no, no, Mum. I wasn't fussed," protested Tom. "No, you give a wrong impression there. A wrong impression altogether."

Her mother cast an expressive glance upon Lydia. Lydia saw in Charlotte for the first time an unsuspected power of facial drollery.

"He persuaded us," concluded Tom. "Persuaded us both. It was very late by the time he'd finished; but he *did* persuade us. No doubt about that."

"I got no sleep that night," said Charlotte. "Your father talking to me, and explaining about the French——"

"I wanted you to appreciate the position," explained Tom.

"That's what he kept saying, Lydia. We were both so excited. And then Mr. Tucker, downstairs in the shop, got talking to

your dad, and of course Dad told him about France, and it turns out that he's a very nice man, although he's so quiet; and it was him that lent us the records——"

"He said to me, 'You talk French, of course,' and I said, 'Well, as a matter of fact, I *don't*.' It hadn't occurred to me that it would be needed there. Well, as it happened, he had these gramophone records, and he offered to lend them to me; so Mum and me put them on last night, and it's easier than you'd think. You soon get the hang of it, you know, if you've got some common sense and can talk your own language. Look here, I'll put that one on again, and you can hear for yourself." He moved away from the fireplace.

"No!" shouted Lydia. She explained: "I want to hear all about you going to France, and etcetera. I don't want to hear records. When are you going? What you going to do when you get there? Who's this Mr. Gerard, and *what* is he? All I know is that you picked him up in a pub."

"Lydia!" groaned her mother.

"Mr. Gerard's a gentleman," reproved Tom. "He lives part of the year in France. He's got an estate there. A house—I don't know; he says a small estate. He wants a man—an Englishman, mind you—to look after the place while he's away; and your Mum here to see that he has English food——"

"Housekeeper, in fact," remarked Lydia.

Tom was not ruffled.

"Call it that if you like. Call me the 'boots,' if you like. The point is that it's a fresh start for us. He says I want an outdoor life——"

"Well, I always thought you could get plenty of people to look after you in France. What's he doing it for?" demanded Lydia. "Charity?"

"It's his goodness," said Charlotte. "He was thinking how he could help your dad. At first he wasn't sure if he could get us into France. You know, the laws there. They're not like us.

They're very particular who they have, Mr. Gerard says. Then he thought he could manage it. We're going as his *friends*."

Lydia was very suspicious of the story they told. But both were entirely blissful.

"What's he like, then?" she asked. "Is he English?"

"As English as my hat," Tom said.

"And a bit less green, I should hope," retorted Lydia. Turning to her mother, she added: "Mum, I don't like all this. It's fishy. You've seen the man. What *is* he like?"

There was no help to be had from this quarter.

"He's a *fine* man," said Charlotte, warmly. "He's *fine*. Directly I saw him, I felt that. I know what you mean, Lydia: you're thinking he's a big talker, the kind of men that wears a top hat and shabby boots and a dirty shirt; but he isn't. He's a gentleman. Very soft-spoken——"

"There! He's soft-spoken!" declared Lydia. "That's the worst yet. He's a Welshman, I expect!"

"Not what you mean. I didn't mean he was a Welshman. Nothing smarmy at all. Oh, dear, how can I make you understand? Well, he's like Sebastian, then. As soft as that. Only he's a taller, fuller figure than Sebastian. You notice him when he's in the room!"

A side-glimpse—by contrast—of Mum's picture of Sebastion! Lydia bit her lip. You got these home-truths by accident in this way. Well, she wouldn't have noticed it if she hadn't had her own secret thoughts—even of Sebastian—would she? All the same, she bit her lip. It wasn't pleasant to be told your husband wasn't seen. She rallied:

"When d'you go?"

They exchanged blank looks. But they did not lose their aspect of quiet confidence. That was the fact which so exasperated Lydia—that in spite of her obvious scepticism they had shown as yet no sign of panic. She could see that this man had inspired them with both hope and confidence. Had it been

hard to do so? She was sure it had not been easy. She herself could never have done it.

"You don't seem to know. Well, I hope he won't let you down. If he doesn't, he'll be the first good thing that ever came out of a pub."

"D'you know——" Charlotte checked her tongue, shot her first uneasy glance, wavered, smiled, and resumed: "Your Dad thinks Mr. Gerard went in at first on purpose to see him—— You know, followed him in——"

"She's hiding something!" thought Lydia, in a flash. "That's not what she was going to say. What was it?"

"Followed him in?" She was quick to take up that admission. "What d'you mean?"

Tom frowned alarmingly. It was as if he came to the rescue.

"Your mum's not got it quite right," he announced. "What I said was that when I went into the saloon bar it was empty. I wasn't feeling quite myself; and, well, as a matter of fact, I went in for a glass of brandy. I'd had a bad day, and a bit of a dust-up at the office, and I wasn't feeling any too grand. So I felt the need of a tonic. And I took it to a chair and sat down. I wasn't noticing anything, and I didn't see Mr. Gerard come in. But he was there, and he had a glass of dry sherry, put it down on the same little table as mine was on, and said it was a nice evening. I said it was, if you fancied it—something like that. He said, 'I can see you're tired.' I said I was; and—well, we got talking, first about this thing and then about that——"

The oratorical manner in which Tom—who now had hold of his coat by the lapels—bobbed to the right and the left as he spoke caused Lydia's lips to twitch. She felt that she did not need to be told the nature or even the order of the conversation.

"He says you should only drink *wine*, Lydia," put in her mother, quietly. "And only when you eat something. He says it's better for you. At first I thought he was a doctor. Oh, he *is* a nice man. I wish you could see him."

"I wish I could," agreed Lydia, heartily. "I'd like to see him with my own eyes. He sounds altogether too much like Father Christmas to me. I'd like to see if his beard's real!"

"He hasn't got one!" cried Charlotte, in triumph. "Only a moustache. Besides, he's not *old*."

Then they all listened. Tom bent forward, his hands continuing to hold the lapels of his coat, and his mouth oracularly drawn down, as if this was his best point of all. Then one hand was detached. A finger was raised. "Mark you!" he seemed to be saying. He rose upon his toes. A moment later there was a slight tapping upon the door, and Lydia felt a tremor of excitement run through her body. She was to see the unknown benefactor.

"A light, Tom!" said Charlotte, in an agitated voice. Then: "Come in, please!" She left her chair, quite fluttered by the coming of this second visitor, and bustled towards the door.

As Tom scrabbled his match against the box, Lydia's sight of the door was obscured by the intervention of her mother's substantial person. She had no more than a glimpse of a masculine figure. The gas flared up, whistling, and illumining the newcomer's features.

V

She had known! That was the first thought to enter Lydia's head. At what point in the confused narrative told by Mum and Dad knowledge had come by the secret process of intuition she would never be sure; but she had known. There was no surprise. As if in answer to some positive expectation, she saw standing in the doorway her stranger of the fire and the averted accident. It was like a dream. Flushing, Lydia started to her feet.

"How d'you do?" said the stranger.

"Good-evening, Mr. Gerard." Charlotte, although fluttered,

was mistress of herself. "We wondered if you'd come this evening. This is my daughter Lydia."

So Mum *had* known something! Her checked speech had been a give-away. The old oyster! That was another thing upon which Lydia's mind unerringly pounced. No surprise, no explanation. Mum had known that the stranger had seen and spoken to Lydia! He must have told her. How much more? She'd give a lot to know.

"How d'you do," Lydia said, bowing. She did not extend her hand, although she knew he had expected it. He was looking at her with that slow, experienced, teasing smile of his, but not with familiarity. There was nothing to read in his expression. Yet Lydia felt her heart beating. She was calm and not calm, confused and demure. All the same, why had he done all this? Was he just somebody who went about doing good deeds by stealth? Or was there something behind the apparent benevolence of his actions? Lydia was on guard.

But although she was on guard she was curious about him. Nothing could check her curiosity. And she remembered that —save for the very first encounter, before they had spoken to one another—she had never really seen her stranger so as to examine his features. And he was so different, now, from what he had then appeared. Then, he had been unsmiling, and he had smiled (she recalled) only at herself upon the night of the fire; now, as he had done when she was with Ambrose, he regarded her with something akin to irony. Why? Was she so amusing? That expression instantly made Lydia defensive. Was it assumed for that very purpose? He knew a lot if he thought he could quiz her into making much of him. And yet he was doing it, wasn't he? The impudent man! How black his hair was! His small moustache emphasised the clean line of his lips, which were thin and straight, and his black eyebrows gave her a sense that he could be very unkind, even harsh, if his temper were roused. His cheeks were rather

plump, his nose was both long and thin, and his temples were narrow, or were made to seem narrow by the greater breadth to which the head swelled immediately above them. And his eyes were the keenest that Lydia had ever seen. They were the eyes of one, she felt, who, if he wantd to look at something or somebody—for instance, herself—looked. But she didn't think he was a bad man. Indeed, she was inclined to think him good. There was certainly a handsomeness as well as a courtesy; a kindness as well as a will. And he wasn't conceited. His hands were beautiful. She liked those hands.

"You have heard about our little plan, Mrs. Rowe?" said the stranger, when they were all seated. He spoke with the same slowness, the same care, that she had noticed formerly. Was he *really* English? Lydia was so occupied in wondering about this, as well as about his character, that she could hardly realise that she was expected to reply to the question. Only when she saw that her mother and father were both looking at her did she stammer out an acknowledgment. Why, what was the matter with her? Nervous? She was mad!

"Yes, I've heard about it."

"You approve, I hope?" He bent towards Lydia. She saw the clear white of his eyes against that olive skin. No, he wasn't English. He was French. The way he had said "approve"——

"I'm curious," announced Lydia, looking directly at his eyes, and refusing to flinch when she found that they were looking, with equal directness, at her own.

"That is exactly what I had hoped," he breathed. "You see, your father—your dad—was in a difficulty. And I, too, was in a difficulty."

"Couldn't get what he wanted in France——" interpolated Tom, explanatorily.

"No, I couldn't get what I wanted," said Mr. Gerard. The ghost of a smile travelled over his lips. And when she saw that

smile Lydia made up her mind. She did not like Mr. Gerard. She was sure of it now. She was curious about him; something in him exasperated and attracted her; but she did not like him.

"So you've got it now," she interrupted, brusquely.

There was a slight movement of his shoulders.

"I hope so," he said quietly, not smiling, but very serious.

"I wonder," thought Lydia. She was regarding him hardly.

"When do you want them to go?" she asked.

"It is a matter to be discussed. It was for the purpose of discussing it——"

"Then I'll go." She rose to her feet. "You don't want me to help you——"

The effect of her words was obvious. She saw his eyes move—flick!—before the lashes hid them. He sprang up, his hands advanced in entreaty.

"Please! Your advice——"

"Lydia!" protested her mother. "Don't go. You've only just come!"

But Lydia, who remembered that she had not taken her mackintosh into the bedroom, and that it lay close at hand, whipped it from the floor and over her shoulders in an instant. She was struggling her arms into the sleeves before Mr. Gerard could reach her. She had only one idea—to counter a plan which might be in this man's head. He now had established a sort of claim upon her, a right to know her—oh, lots of excuses, lots to say, to ask, to tell—and if he offered to walk through the streets with her she could not, before her mother and father, refuse without seeming to be rude. And she wasn't going to have him always—— The only thing to do was to go at once, upon this pretext.

"You'll miss all the fun, Lydia," remarked Tom, with great self-assurance. "Might just as well stay and help us out."

The stranger had drawn back to the wall, near the door. He

said nothing further to dissuade her from going—only looked very gravely at her and waited. Lydia kissed her mother and father, turned, went to the door, holding her hands half behind her, so that he should understand that she did not wish for the formal farewell.

"Good-night, Mr. Gerard."

Then she was in the street, the rain and wind once again upon her cheeks, and was walking with great rapidity in the direction of her home. No longer did the tall houses impress her, or the lights and reflections. She was unconscious of them. She was conscious, in fact, of very little except an unusual breathlessness, a curious impulse to laugh and to speak aloud, a wish to reach home and tell Sebastian about all that had happened and all that was to happen.

"He won't know what to make of it!" she laughed, delightedly. "Well, I don't, myself. I hope it's all right. Those poor old things. They've gone fantee. It's good for them—now. But later on: Will it last? What's he after? Does he really want them? Or—what? I don't like him. That smile of his. He's not good. I don't like him. There's something—I believe I'm a bit frightened of him."

She hurried onward.

PART THREE

THE RISING TIDE

CHAPTER TEN: AN EXPLANATION

I

DEAFENED by the rumbling of trolleys, the thunderous gasping of railway engines, and the customary tumult of a busy railway-station, Lydia gazed about her. She felt a dwarf among the men in uniform who pushed the trolleys or who stood by the barriers, examining tickets and passports. They had such purpose; they appeared to be so full of knowledge and authority; they were not afraid even of the tall, well-dressed men and women who sauntered so negligently towards the train. Lydia, excited by the occasion, did not realise how calm she herself looked: she was merely astonished that her mother and father should, by instinct, have assumed with such success an air of unconcern.

Tom, it was true, could not keep still. He was wearing new tweed clothes, squeaky new brown shoes, and a new hat—the first Lydia ever remembered to have seen upon his head. The discarded hat, sold with other garments to an old clo' man, had been inadvertently left behind by the dealer, and they had been forced to put it in the dustbin after all. The new one, as usual, was too large for him; but that was because Tom's head was of a peculiar shape. Any hat, as worn by him, tended to slip backwards and over his ears, however much he cocked it forward to shade his eyes. And when cocked forward, as now, it lurched to one side, seeking stability. Hence the rakishness of Tom's appearance. He had bought newspapers at the bookstall, and had set them down upon his seat in the carriage. He had gravely contemplated the possessions of two fellow-travellers, old ladies who were clearly alarmed lest he should offer to play cards with them en route. And he had climbed out of the compartment again, over his wife's knees, to the platform, where he had stared up and down rather imperiously, with his hands in his overcoat pockets

and a grimace of self-assurance drawing his mouth to one side.

In spite of her inclination to ridicule this display, Lydia could not help being impressed by it. She was impressed, but she was also suspicious. Was he as sure of himself as he seemed? Could any human being feel as sure?

"Your tie's crooked," she nervously reminded him. Tom haughtily frowned. She had not the courage, before all these people, who might be quizzing, to set it straight.

Charlotte, standing in the carriage doorway as soon as Tom had descended, was also wearing a new coat of black cloth, and was carrying an enormous black leather handbag stuffed with papers, handkerchiefs, smelling salts, and other rubbish. She was even calmer than Tom. She held her head very high, and supported a plain bonnet, with black velvet strings which tied in a large bow under the chin. Antediluvian! thought Lydia. Why should a woman look old sooner than a man? But the bonnet suited her mother's round white face, and increased her resemblance to Queen Victoria.

"Feeling all right, Mum?" asked Lydia.

"Yes, thank you." How stately!

"Not frightened of the boat?"

"*Neau!*" said Charlotte, with dignity. "What nonsense!" She swallowed quickly. Lydia was repressed. And yet, if it had been her lot at this time to leave England for good, and to venture upon the waters, she knew that she would already have felt the sinking stomach of the fearful mariner. Nay, she felt it vicariously now. Admiringly, she warmed to these dauntless emigrants. They were true stoics! Or were they *not* such stoics? She glanced again at Tom, who was whispering to himself.

"What's that?" she asked him. Tom's eyes fixed their protrusive stare upon her.

"I was only whistling," he retorted, and turned his head away. Now Lydia was sure that this was not quite true. He

had been whispering, not whistling. But *what?* Lydia tried to think. Then she saw a porter pushing a loaded trolley of luggage, and this sight distracted her attention, so that she forgot to press her incredulous questions. The porter was followed by a very tall, very bleached Englishman, of the type caricatured and indeed only seen upon the Continent of Europe. This man, superbly unaware of everything about him, was in tweeds of a colour subtly different from the colour which had attracted Tom, and he had a tweed hat which did not match his clothes. Lydia, making instant comparison, realised that this man's outfit, although so like her father's, was quite unlike. The man, too, was unlike Tom. Both, however, were men. He kept pace with the struggling porter by means of long, negligent strides.

How loudly the puffs of that engine echoed!

"Peemer!" shouted the boy who pushed a trolley of magazines and journals. "Peemer; megzin." He passed, and they all turned and looked amazedly after him.

"Hm. Esperanto," remarked Tom, caustically.

None of them had anything to say. Charlotte, propped sombrely in the doorway of the carriage, did not lift her eyes. She seemed to be placidly waiting. Tom, treading deliberately about the platform as if he were playing slow-motion hopscotch, had his head lowered, and was again whispering thoughtfully to himself.

"Well, you won't be long getting to Dover," ventured Lydia to her mother. "Got all you want? And you'll write, won't you! It's nice that Mr. Gerard's going to meet you with his car."

A silent nodding of the head from her mother.

"What's Dad got on his mind? Where's he off to, now?"

"He'll miss the train!" said Charlotte. It was the first sign of nervous vitality that she had given. She moved. All her limbs moved. The white face spread into life. "Run after him,

Lydia. Quick, now! He'll miss the train with his doddering!"

Lydia scampered, upon her toes, with short steps. But Tom was only approaching the guard, half as a fellow-creature and half as a patron, to ask a question which he thought might suitably be put at such a time. And in any case there were still ten long minutes to wait before the train left. Tom said as much when summoned by Lydia. An irritable air displayed itself.

"There's *plenty* of time; there's *plenty* of time," he said. "Now *don't* get agitated. They won't start without me. And Mum there might just as well get out and stand on the platform, instead of parking herself in the doorway, like an old dog looking out of a kennel."

"Who's a dog?" retorted Charlotte. "I feel safer here. Besides, someone might take our things."

"Huh!" laughed Tom, with a kind of snort. "You forget we're still in England! Time enough to worry when we get to the other side." To Lydia, behind his hand, he added in a loud whisper—which carried to her nostrils the scent of spirits: "Did you see the two old girls? They'll *like* that, they will. Your Mum's always tactful!" He grunted with semi-secret, semi-assumed laughter.

Reckless travellers were still arriving; and pyramids of luggage were still being stowed away by active porters. Far down the platform, at the barriers, a little knot of late-comers was gathered. Two very smart girls were jingling past, chattering brightly under Lydia's scornful eye. It seemed as though the train would never start, as though the stream of people who purposed travelling by it would never end. But the guard had already once consulted his watch, and had folded his arms, exhibiting as he did this the green flag which he would presently wave. A few people, losing their nerve, began to run along the platform. There was a little nervous stir all about them. The tempo of life seemed suddenly to have quickened.

And, at that, Lydia realised with pain that there was no more time. These two were going. She could not possibly see them for many weeks; she might never see them again. France might swallow them up, while she, condemned to Kentish Town, might suffer endlessly the boredoms of the damned.

"Yes, well, you'll be there for tea," she said hastily to her mother. "And you're not nervous, or anything; and you can remember me to Mr. Gerard; and take care of yourself, and not fall among the engines or anything. Sebastian says look out for the trains puffing about the streets like lorries. And you'll see Mr. Gerard when you get off the boat, and he'll get you through the Customs. And Dad knows not to fight the gendarmes all at once, and always take off his hat to the policemen."

"Huh!" laughed Dad, with false joviality. "Huh, huh!" It occurred to Lydia that he was a little pale.

"And don't get lost, Mum. Stick to Dad!"

"I shall," said Mum, tightly. "I shall tell them I'm English."

"They won't understand."

She noticed that Dad was whispering to himself again. She listened to his whisper, but could make nothing of it.

"J'attends un gentilhomme," declared Dad. "Je suis Anglais." Under his breath, he anxiously added: "Je ne comprends pas."

"Ah!" cried Lydia, in triumph. Why, Dad was as nervous as a mouse! "He's saying his piece!"

"Take your seats, please," said a voice at her elbow. In the concern with other matters, she had forgotten—they had all forgotten—the approaching departure of the train. Dad shiveringly kissed Lydia; Lydia stepped up to the train to kiss her mother; Dad pushed both of them aside and clambered in; the door was shut and the heavy handle turned.

And then, after this fury, nothing happened. The impris-

oned seniors were huddled together at the window—mutually exclusive;—while Lydia wavered upon the platform.

"Wish I was coming," she said, wistfully. And saw that Tom nodded with gloomy agreement. But her mother said nothing. Her face was just as white and placid as usual; her small mouth was set in its customary composure; her eyes were as bright, and no brighter. She looked as hard and relentless as a pastry-eating schoolboy bidding farewell to an unloved parent.

The guard grew animated. There was a whistle. A waving of the green flag. The train was almost imperceptibly moving. And as it moved Charlotte suddenly shot out a hand and clung to Lydia's hand. Her lips twitched. The tip of her nose turned pink. Her eyes implored.

"Lydia!" she squealed, in a little high-pitched tone. "Lydia! Oh, my God!"

"All right, Mum! All right, Mum!" Lydia was crying at the last. Just a little, the merest starting of tears. They would be gone in an instant. Look, they were already gone!

"Stand away! Stand away!" A chorus of indignant voices reproved mother and daughter for this unseemliness. There was a fluttering. The windows were all busy with faces and kerchiefs. The train slowly rolled from beside the platform and out along those shining rails. Smoke rose from its distant engine. So gently, so quietly, did all move that weight and power were alike concealed. The strong silent train! thought Lydia, unexpectedly, and made herself smile through the tears that blurred sight of those two frightened faces at the carriage window. "Good-bye! Good-bye! And *write!*"

Was there a nodding in reply? Lydia could not tell. The faces grew smaller and smaller, fainter and fainter; the hands were no longer to be distinguished. At last nothing could be seen but a moving mass, and the glittering parallels of steel over which that mass had passed.

She waved and whipped her handkerchief for as long as she

could hope that it was still visible. And when that possibility was gone, she followed the train and its two passengers in imagination through the wooded greenness of the South Country, and rapidly past the gardens and orchards and hop-fields of Kent, to that first magic glimpse of the jewelled sea. She could picture the smoking funnel of the little ship at the quayside, and those two, no more to the eye than tiny black figures scrambling on board, not knowing where to stand or sit, but huddled together looking their last upon the English green and the white chalk of the shore.

Beyond that, Lydia could not imagine anything more definite than a delicious strangeness, the sound of another tongue, and a chaos of sensation. Quite dazed, she stood for a moment upon the platform, a lonely figure, her kerchief dangling by her side, lost to all consciousness of her surroundings.

II

They'd gone. The lucky ones! And now she must trudge home again. Always.

Resistance to that sense of inevitable duty arose in Lydia. Why should she never be free? Had not Sebastian urged her not to hurry home? Yes, but he was there by himself. . . . She sighed heavily.

"There's those two poor old things in the train. . . . And Sebastian waiting for his dinner," she thought, dully. Her mind seemed to stop for a moment; and then to give a jump and turn a Catherine wheel. "And I'm getting just like them!" she exclaimed. "All stale and timid! And I won't! I just *won't!*"

With which rebellious determination she walked out of the station, into the brilliance and roar of those traffic-confounded streets about Victoria, ran for life to escape an erratic car, found herself upon the corner of Buckingham Palace Road, and was inspired to walk along in the direction of St.

James's Park. Here was her opportunity! She was free! Why should she not stroll awhile in St. James's Park, lunch at a Corner House, look at the shops? Or again, why should she not cross the Green Park and Piccadilly, and go and watch the boats on the Serpentine, and so across Hyde Park to the Marble Arch, walk along Baker Street, and end up with Regent's Park and the Zoological Gardens?

"How enthusiastic I am!" jeered Lydia. "I shouldn't get out of the Zoo alive!"

But she executed the first part of her plan, and after leaning over the bridge in St. James's Park, and watching the active ducks there, she did in fact cross the Green Park and enter Hyde Park. It was eleven o'clock as she seated herself overlooking the Serpentine, and she was already tired. She sat well back, so that the toes of her shoes would not stay upon the ground, but stuck up like the heads of the ducks she had been watching. How shabby they were! Lydia felt, with a pang.

"But then I'm *all* shabby. It makes you *feel* mean, when you *look* mean," she thought. "They don't understand what a nice dress does for you!"

It was true. She was dressed less becomingly than she should have been; and the new clothes worn by her mother and father had suggested the thought of shabbiness to her. But to anybody excepting herself the shabbiness would have been less obvious than she imagined. She wore an old dress of blue cotton which had kept its colour well in spite of two or three washings; and over it was an unpretentious light summer coat of darker blue cloth. Her hat, which was of felt, was black, as were her gloves and shoes. The warm weather in the close atmosphere of Kentish Town had robbed her cheeks of the sharpness of health, and she presently, in slipping her feet down until the soles of her shoes were flat to the pathway, half-reclined upon the seat with an air of languor. Above her

head the sun was increasing in heat and brilliance; it would soon make the grass look as if it had been burnished, and would produce above the paths and in the distance that spiraling quiver which is the mark of a really hot day. Very few sounds came to Lydia here; only the voices of some children who were rocking their dolls in a small perambulator at a seat a short distance away. She wondered idly why they were not at school. Then, why there were so few people about. It was mid-week, and the hour was still early, and it was June.

For a long time Lydia did not consciously think of anything at all. She allowed the sunshine to warm her, and turned lazy eyes to the two little girls with the perambulator, watching them as they busily dressed and undressed their dolls, and spanked and cuddled them, and combed the golden hair above the pasty, simpering faces. The girls spoke in hushed tones, and she could not hear the words they used; but all the actions were so expressive, and indicated such engrossment in their play, that they made her smile with gentle amusement. How serious the two of them were! Not a glimmer of fun when they pretended to be cross with their babies or anxious about them. Once there was a ripple of laughter as one little girl invented a cheeky remark which she declared had been made by her doll. "She says . . ." came a silvery voice. The rest was lost. But both children giggled for a time over this remark, and the doll was lifted high in the air, and shrilly scolded. "You *bad* girl! You *bad* girl!" Lydia could see its helpless face of blank surprise. Oh, lucky kids!

Something made Lydia jump up from the seat. She could not bear to sit there any longer. Her body was tired of inactivity. She was quite stiff, and her back ached as if she had caught influenza. Perhaps she had? There was always a risk of it. But then, when she had walked a few paces, she felt disagreeably tired of walking. It wasn't as if she had walked far this morning. Not at all. Just that she was restless. After

all, she told herself, it was not such a tremendous time since she too had played with dolls, exactly as these two little girls were doing. Not such a tremendous time. She hadn't changed much. She still felt, sometimes, that she was a little girl. She didn't know what she wanted. She could neither walk nor sit still. What an idiot! But she was certainly too tired to go trailing through Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens. She could hardly bring herself to put one foot before another. She was tired, tired——

Thus it came about that as soon as she was out of earshot of the little girls she sat down again, upon a seat not many yards from the one upon which she had rested earlier. From this seat she could command very nearly the same picture of the Serpentine, with ducks swimming, two women rowing very pleasantly in a small boat, and a vision of green beyond the sparkling water. All, however, had been changed for Lydia by the uprising of a feeling of loneliness and frustration. She had passed from the emotional stress of saying good-bye to her father and mother to a state of lassitude; and from this lassitude again she had been roused to memory of unhappy things by the voices of those children who played with their dolls. From memory of childhood she had risen quickly to memory of the immediate present, and so to the thought of Ambrose.

He was never long absent from her mind, and he poisoned its every activity. The speculations which he created were all tinged with discomfort and with uncertainty. She was weary, not happy. Her eyes became fixed, less upon the scene itself than upon some point in it which allowed her doubts to have undisturbed play.

What was he doing? Was he ill? She wouldn't mind if she knew that he was well, if she could be sure that he was not hiding from her through some silliness of which she guessed nothing. She wouldn't mind—she wouldn't mind *anything*, she told herself, if only those two, Ambrose and Sebastian,

would be happy. But they were both secret and at war. They couldn't be sensible. Why couldn't they be sensible?

"Oh, what's the matter with me?" she demanded of herself. "Anybody would think I'd gone and fallen in love with the boy. It's mad!" There was a hiatus in her thoughts, a long pause. She added: "Have I?"

It was an unanswerable question. She did not know. If she had, what about Sebastian?

III

Lydia's feelings drove her at last to leave the second seat. Standing, with eyes cast down, she hesitated as to the direction she should take—whether homeward, or along towards Kensington Gardens; and at last, unable to make a choice, she drifted aimlessly towards the bridge, hardly walking, but loitering in the sunshine. In her memory there formed a picture of the playing fields at Highgate, near which, on that wonderful Saturday afternoon, she had met Ambrose. Often enough, she had been tempted to descend there, in the effort to relive a past delight. But this was more than pride could endure. Other women might do it; not Lydia! Pooh, Lydia! said the other, decrying, voice in her heart; where was she better than others? She was worse.

The vision of the playing fields faded. She became conscious once again of her present surroundings. The path was wide; and the bushes here and there offered shade from the mounting sun. She must go home. Not yet! She couldn't go yet. There were other seats here, in the wavering discs of shadow cast by those bushes and small trees. It would be nice—if one were not so restless—to sit in the shade. But by now other people were here; and as she came to it each seat appeared to be occupied. A seedy old man upon one, a nursemaid upon another, moving a large perambulator with ex-

tended foot, while a baby, half asleep, droned out a sick wail of distress, and the nurse stared ferociously at the close-printed pages of a novelette. Poor idiot! Hotting herself all over with rubbish about love and love and love! Lydia didn't want to sit near that squalling baby, nor near the seedy old man. She would go on. There would be other seats. Besides—said her humour—she'd tried two. Seats weren't lucky this morning: they had lost their charm.

Upon the next seat a man was reclining. He was not asleep, and he was not reading. He lay back in the seat, half turned away from Lydia, and his hand was raised to his face, which, owing to the presence of his hand and the shadow of his hat, was almost entirely concealed. He looked ill, or ill at ease; and, as she approached, Lydia, who had lately been so restless herself, cast a sympathetic glance upon this unhappy figure. Only when she was less than half-a-dozen yards away did something clutch at her heart, and cause her to look again at the man upon the seat. Was there not something extraordinarily familiar, if not in his attitude or his clothes, at least in his *quality*? She could not be mistaken. It was Ambrose. The blood seemed to leave her heart, and she stood quite still in the middle of the path, unable to move.

While Lydia stood, hesitantly smiling, and her eyes glowing, Ambrose became aware of an interruption to his reverie. He moved his hand, sighed, stared blankly, sat up, and finally started to his feet. Across his face rushed expressions of bewilderment, dismay, joy, and discomfort. His hat fell off as he jumped up, and as he stood bare-headed Lydia saw again, with secret delight, his heavy shock of almost golden hair.

"I wasn't sure if it *was* you," Lydia said, breathlessly. All her melancholy had passed. She was happy, and alert with spirit. But she saw Ambrose slowly redden, like a sullen schoolboy. That gave the first alarm. He was constrained; he did not respond. Then he had not wanted to see her! He had been

taken unawares. Some painful memory had been revived and was working in him, causing his lips to move and his hands to clench. "Aren't you pleased to see me?" she asked, quickly, humbly. "I believe you're sorry. I'll go." She had grown very pale.

"Oh, God!" stammered Ambrose. "No. I shouldn't go. Did you know——" He put his hand to his brow, and pressed it over his eyes. "This is so unexpected. I . . . I think I must have been half-asleep. I'm awfully sorry."

Not half-asleep: confused: suspicious. Not half-asleep, but tortured by illness and some extraordinary distrust of her. Lydia, watching him, was silent. Of what was she accused? She mustn't let him see that she read his mood so clearly.

"I was thinking about you a little while ago," she said. "I didn't think I should be seeing you. I thought—I thought perhaps I shouldn't." In a moment she added: "But I didn't know why that should be."

"I've been ill," stammered Ambrose, looking away.

"You're still ill, I should think," murmured Lydia. "You look to me as if you wanted nursing. Have you got anybody to look after you?"

He shook his head constrainedly.

"Couldn't you have somebody?"

"Oh, I'm . . . I . . . I'm really all right. I mustn't——"

"You haven't been to see us!" she reproached him.

"I know." A silence.

There was the sound of steps upon the path, and two girls passed, both talking at once, and laughing. One of them said, "My dear, he didn't say a *word!*" and the other said, "I was *highly* amused!" and Lydia moved to the side of the path to allow the girls room to walk abreast. By her movement she was brought closer to Ambrose, but less confusingly opposite to him; and the consequence was that he seemed at last to be able to speak.

"Do you . . . do you often come here?" asked Ambrose, in a nervous gust of conversationalism. "I didn't think——"

"I haven't been here for years," answered Lydia. "I've been seeing my mother and father off at Victoria. Did you know I had a mother and father?"

He did not hear her. He was thinking intently of something else.

"Yes," he said, abruptly. "I remember." And the accusing expression returned to his eyes. He was no longer a friend, or even an acquaintance, but a judge. "We walked——" A look of such pain crossed his face that Lydia was alarmed. He was cold: she could not bear coldness. He was severe. But what claim had he to be a judge?

"That was the last time I saw you," she said, following his speech. Then, hesitatingly: "I thought we said we were going to be friends." Colder and colder grew his eyes. There was angry contempt in them. Almost with terror, she was driven to sudden frank speech. "You're looking so oddly," she stammered, in a very low voice. "You frighten me. Is it something I've *done?* Something I've *said?*"

"Nothing," answered Ambrose. "Nothing at all."

Lydia insisted:

"It *is* something. And it's making you ill. That's all I care about. Why don't you tell me, and let me help you?" He was silent. "Is it something I've done? Is it *me?*" If Ambrose wavered under her searching eye, he did not speak. "Well, then, your father: is it something to do with him?"

A change came over his face at that last guess of hers. He swayed a little, and moistened his lips, which had become very pale and dry, as if he were indeed labouring under great strain. She could see that he was breathing rapidly. His hands were clenched. He did not look at her.

"Ambrose," said Lydia. "You're hurting me!"

A look of agony was cast at her.

"And it's all *nothing*, I'm sure!" she cried. "You wouldn't look at *me* like that if it was your father!"

"I'm not living at home now," Ambrose said. "I've left my father's house. I couldn't stay there any longer. Incredible things happened." His voice dropped. "*Perfectly* incredible. Oh, I couldn't tell you the sort of thing. He was——" For the first time, in indignation, the embarrassed lethargy which had paralysed him was overcome. He moved plungingly as of old. Life was restored to all his limbs. "Things you wouldn't credit." He left off speaking, and looked at her with a revival of doubt.

"Tell me, then," begged Lydia. "Let's sit down here, and you tell me." She laid her hand gently upon his arm. "Where you were sitting. Then you can tell me. See?"

"No, no," he said. "I couldn't tell you. Too humiliating. Too horribly humiliating. I left the house. I couldn't stand it any longer. It was too unbearable. And then——" He sank once again into helpless silence, staring before him, weariness and disgust distorting his expression.

"Then," prompted Lydia, at last, after waiting what seemed to be an hour. She sat down, so that he should be persuaded to seat himself beside her. Hesitating, Ambrose looked at the seat, made as if to leave her; and with what sounded like a groan slipped into the vacant place.

"I can't tell you," he exclaimed miserably. Indeed, his shoulders drooped. He was like an old man, drained of vitality, watching shiny leaves in the sunlight yet not seeing them, listless and without hope.

"Well, *there's* a thing to say!" protested Lydia, reproachfully, as she would have said the words to a child. But she was unhappy enough for tears.

He was looking moodily away from her. For a long time he did not speak at all. When he did so his voice was dry, as though he were exhausted. His face was hard and bitter.

"When I'm with you," he said, "it seems that I must trust you. I can't help myself. I try, and I can't help myself. When I *know*——"

Lydia's blood ran cold.

"You don't know anything," she answered, in the same low tone. She saw Ambrose close his eyes, and nod wearily. "*What* d'you know, then? Something about *me?* No. You don't." She had forgotten the scene and the sunlight. Everything was dark to her. "There isn't anything to know. Ever since I saw you, I've been—— Let me think." She was trembling again, holding her hands to keep them steady. "No. Nothing. I've got a clear conscience." With an effort, she smiled at him as she said this. "*Now* what have you got to say?"

It appeared, at first, that he had nothing to say. But it was not so. He turned, and looked at her incredulously. And Lydia, sitting beside him in her long blue coat and black felt hat, her face blanched but her lips steady, answered his look with one of such natural candour that he was obviously impressed and shamed by it.

"You say that?" Ambrose muttered, confusedly. He seemed to consider. "Oh, but I haven't any right to talk to you like this. I know I haven't. I'm making myself ridiculous. Intolerably ridiculous. Oh, God!" His self-disgust was painful to see.

"Never mind about that," urged Lydia. "You tell me——" She set her gloved hand upon one of Ambrose's hands, pressing it gently. "That's what I want you to do. Then we shall get it straight, see? If you don't we shan't. You're worrying about something—perhaps it's nothing. It's generally nothing that people worry about—only just something they've made up. Perhaps it's that with you."

He gave her a quick, suspicious glance. Lydia saw him swallow, caught the lightening of his face—almost a smile—

felt her heart leap. She was winning. He was looking better.

"You're extraordinary!" breathed Ambrose.

"I know I am," responded Lydia, suddenly gay. Such relief as she felt!

"You make me feel—better," he continued. "And a fool!"

"I'm so glad!" Lydia said. "Not about the second."

"But I shall——"

"You mustn't. You mustn't go back. First of all tell me what you've been thinking about me. And then what you've been doing. And what you're going to do. Where you're living. Everything. Aren't I greedy?" Her spirits were rising each instant. She was conscious of power, of tenderness. She was a mother, demonstrating a mother's triumphant skill; and Ambrose, as if she was dreaming, was her boy, in pain, in sorrow, opening his heart. "From the beginning, mind!"

So imperious was Lydia, and so quickly did she press her advantage, that he was helpless. She could see him recovering strength, and lifting his head, even as she spoke. What a power she had!

"I'm ashamed," stammered Ambrose, hesitating.

"You can cut all that out," she told him. "We know all that."

"I'll tell you." He paused to choose the beginning of his story. "I found my father was meddling with my papers. He had been to my room, and had read what I had been writing——"

"What was it?"

"Poems. Bits of letters. I'd been writing—— He began talking about them in the most horrible way, sneering. I didn't say anything. Then he began to threaten. I was frightfully angry. I felt murderous. When he threatened——"

"Who did he threaten?" asked Lydia. "You?"

"I could have stood that. He threatened . . . the person the letters had been written to. Oh, it doesn't matter. He

couldn't *do* anything, because he didn't know for certain who it was. . . He threatened to find out. I told you what he was. So I came away. I got all my things together; and got a taxi; and came away. You see, I've got a little money of my own—about two hundred a year—that's all; and I can probably earn some. And I found a place—just some rooms—where I can stay. I had to pay in advance, but of course that was all right. . ."

"What an old *beggar!*" said Lydia, only half-aloud.

"So you see——" concluded Ambrose. He raised his hands slightly from his knees, as if that was all he was going to tell.

"Yes, I see. And now, what about me?" asked Lydia.

His face darkened again.

"I'm not going to tell you that," he said.

"Yes, you are. If you don't, you'll begin to think of it after I'm gone; and you'll begin to believe it all over again——"

"Oh, it isn't a question——" He began to disclaim haughtily. But as he met her bright eyes his own fell. The arrogance which moved him died. He tried to speak. At last, in an unsteady voice, pausing often, he went on: "That night I was terribly excited. I didn't know what to do with myself. I walked about the Heath for hours. I was in a fever."

"Poor boy!"

"I felt I *must* see you."

"Me?" Lydia started. She whispered the word to herself. Poems? Letters? Her hand went to her heart. Her sight was blurred. She listened desperately, while Ambrose, unconscious of her exclamation, continued:

"I went through the streets. Just anywhere. But I knew where I was going. Though I tried not to go, I was carried along. At last I found myself outside the shop. It was quite late. The streets were all dark. I didn't dare to go in. I could see a light inside, and saw your husband in that place at the back of the shop. He had a light over his head. Sometimes he

walked about the shop. Two or three times he came to the door, and opened it. I suppose looking for you. No good; I couldn't bring myself to go in. I went across the road, opposite, and looked up. There was no light in the upper windows or down below. I walked up and down. I thought you might be out; I thought I might catch you as you came home. I didn't know what to do."

"Where can I have been?" said Lydia, wonderingly.

"I was there for a long time. At last I saw you."

"Saw me?" It was sharp. "Where?"

"In the street. Quite close. You . . . you weren't alone." He was like a hawk. All the misery had returned to his face, making it bleak.

"Then it wasn't me," Lydia declared, stoutly. "Couldn't have been."

Ambrose gave again that long, slow, hopeless nod, so grim and so sorrowful.

"It was," he said.

"No." Lydia was as confident as he.

"You were with that fellow I'd seen. By the pond. You told me you didn't know him——"

"Fellow? Ah!" Lydia's exclamation was high-pitched—almost a suppressed scream. "The night of the fire. But it was raining. Oh, you poor——"

Ambrose interrupted her.

"At first I couldn't believe it. I saw you leave him, go across the road and into the shop. Then I *knew*. I don't know what I did then." His knuckles were white as he pressed his long hands together in pain.

Lydia sat upright. She did not attempt to touch him. She knew that he would have shuddered and drawn away from her. That he might even rise and go. She must instantly tell her story, in such a way as to enforce belief.

"Listen," she said urgently. "You've got it all wrong, of

course. Just as I knew you had. Let me tell you what it was. I'd run out to see a fire. And I got pushed about in the crowd and thrown out almost into that man's arms. He dragged me into a gateway, and kept me there till it was safe. Then, afterwards, he took me through the crowd, so that I shouldn't come to any harm. That's all. That's absolutely all. I just thanked him, and went indoors. That's what you saw. I couldn't have done much less, could I!" She watched him, to see the effect of her words, and perceived that he was still unsatisfied. Instantly, her mind leapt to the nature of his doubt. "Ambrose, when I said I didn't know him, I told you the truth. I did, really. But he was very kind that night. I might have had a rough-house, you know. Fancy you thinking—— It was awfully silly of you. Now, that *was* silly of you. It was! You *must* listen to me. Listen, I *do* know him now. You mustn't have any more misunderstandings. I know him now—and don't even like him. His name's Mr. Gerard. I think he's French. It's through him that my Dad and Mum are going to France. But when I said I didn't know him, I *didn't* know him; and if you saw me that night you made up in your own mind a silly lot of rubbish about me that you'd no business to. It was unkind, as well as silly. And I'm ashamed of you."

Quite worked up, she left off speaking. Her tongue was dry, and her eyes burning.

"Is that true?" Ambrose was demanding, fiercely. He had turned searchingly towards her, full of excitement, his pride dominant. He was quite changed.

"About the fire? About *him?* Of course it is!" Lydia was as defiant as he. She was suffocating.

Ambrose rose to his feet, pacing the gravel in front of her, plunging about, letting his arms fly, and swooping like a grotesque bird.

"Oh, God! Oh, God!" he was exclaiming. "The fool! The cad!" Anguish had taken the place of doubt. There was an

expression of disgust upon his mouth. And as that, too, was conquered, he grew radiant. "Yes. Yes. I say, I don't wonder you're ashamed of me. I'm ashamed of *myself*. Unpardonable! Nothing to be said. Simply nothing at all. I know it. But if you'd——"

Lydia, with tears in her eyes, lay back in the seat, watching him, and smiling, her heart soft. The angry excitement of defiance was gone. It was as if the strength which had been in her had in some way communicated itself to Ambrose, for she was completely exhausted. She had hardly the power to lift her hand as it lay beside her upon the seat.

IV

At last, having walked about for a moment longer, swinging his arms and vehemently entwining his fingers, half in supplication and half in the need for the self infliction of some physical pain, Ambrose flung himself down in his place beside Lydia. He did this with such force that he made the solid seat quiver.

"You know, I'm awfully ashamed," he said, in a breathless way. "It doesn't make it any better to say that, except that it relieves my feelings. But I *am*. I don't know how I could possibly have thought that about you. I mean,—I see now that it was perfectly horrible of me. I suppose I was worked up, and the state of mind I was in, and seeing you . . . I just jumped to. . . It was loathsome of me. But you can't realise what I'd been going through. I was out of my mind. Now, of course, I see the beastliness of it——"

"Well, it's over, now," Lydia said, faintly smiling still. "Until next time. I'm afraid you've got a rather strong temper."

"You mean I'm unbalanced!" exclaimed Ambrose. "I *know*! It's awful!"

"Is that what I mean?" she asked. "Well, I don't think you're easy to manage, anyhow. But then I don't know who is, these days. What I really meant was that you get something into your head, and get worked up about it. It's the way women are supposed to do."

"Yes, but think of what I'd gone through!" he pleaded.

Lydia was so tired that she could only sit quite still. It was very pleasant to listen to Ambrose speaking. She did not tell him what she had herself endured, in suspense. It did not occur to her to do so.

They sat for a little while longer, without saying anything more; until Lydia noticed that the shadow in which they had been sitting had gone. The sun was right overhead. Goodness! she wondered what the time could be. It was very hard, in this mood of relaxation after care, to remember that she must not stay.

"You haven't got anything else on your mind, have you," she said, at last. "You won't start thinking up trouble as soon as you're alone?"

"I shall think of nothing but *this*," Ambrose answered, sparkling. "How good you are! How good! When I've been so beastly."

"Yes," murmured Lydia. "I'm good. But an hour ago——"

"I know, I *know!*" protested Ambrose. "Yes, you were all the horrible things a woman *can* be to the man——" His impetuous words were suddenly checked.

"To the man who makes up his mind to it," said Lydia. "Oh, but that's an old story. You read a lot about what women think of men. And it's never true. But what men think about *women*—well, perhaps it's better we don't know."

"They only think about particular men," Ambrose told her, airily.

Lydia laughed: the corollary was too clear to her.

"Ah, but what you were going to say belongs to what men

think about *themselves,"* she explained. "And that's just simply funny. Unselfish, good-natured, decent, give-the-other-chap-a-fair-show sports,—*you* know! I've never met a man who didn't secretly worship himself. Of course," she added archly, "I haven't met many men—not to know them well, I mean."

He had been frowning at her disclosure of sophistication; but when she so simply established her innocence he was happy again.

"Oh, yes," he said, with sublimity. "Of course you wouldn't understand their sense of responsibility."

Again Lydia laughed—from happiness, as well as in ridicule.

"I could listen to you for hours!" she declared. "Only I think it's time I went home now. The only thing that keeps me is the thought that you've got to go back to dreary rooms when you're not well. And besides, it may be a month before I see you again; and by that time I don't know *what* you'll be thinking of me."

"Only that you're adorable," said Ambrose, under his breath. "Forgive me! I can't help saying that. I know it's inexcusable."

His eyes were imploring; his lips trembled. He was a boy, at her mercy. There was something akin to a radiation from him of ardent homage. Lydia composed her features to an expression of gravity.

"I don't expect there's another woman on earth who'd excuse you for saying that," she told him. "But I'll try to." And when Ambrose looked alarmedly into her eyes, and saw how they shone with laughter, he was at first bewildered and then so fully conscious of Lydia's elementary irony that he grew red and, in confusion, laughed aloud.

"But every minute you grow *more* so!" he stammered. "I . . . simply can't *help* telling you so."

He did not try to detain her, but stood, hatless, in the path until she was out of sight. Lydia, hastening homeward, felt

the muscles of her face aching as if her smile of relief had become fixed. But her heart had been so much lightened that she could not restrain any longer the laughter with which the charming naïvetés of Ambrose, no less than the explanation she had had with him, had filled her. In turn, that laughter brought tears to her eyes; and she walked on towards the sun-stricken, traffic-crowded streets beyond the limits of the Park as if she were indeed in another world.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE VISIT

I

THE world to which Lydia returned that afternoon was very much the world of every day, and yet it was shot with many colours. So hot was the afternoon, and so warm were the little breezes which lifted dust and set it whirling in the air, that everybody she saw was yawning. She herself yawned. How tired she was! Her mouth ached, her eyes ached. But she hardly seemed to tread the pavement, so lightly did her steps carry her home. As of old, she impetuously entered the shop, called out reassuringly to Sebastian, experienced the stale chill of the atmosphere; but she ignored all these details, because heart and mind alike were dancing.

Sebastian, at her entry, was squatting upon the bare boards of the shop, engaged in the examination of a gate-legged table from which one of the feet had been detached in transit between its former home and the shop. He looked very dirty and dusty, but he was happy. His present occupation had some of the attractiveness of a mud pie; for from some secret store of such things he had brought a collection of small pieces of old oak, and was trying each of his pieces against the mutilated leg. If he found one that would pass, Lydia knew that there would presently be a smell of hot glue in the shop—as repulsive as that which other nostrils might detect in Oldé Antique Shoppés, but to Sebastian, in his own home, as sweet as the scent of wallflowers.

She stood, still in her hat and coat, looking at Sebastian's absorption in his task, while he, placidly aware of her presence, continued to move and to apply the little blocks of wood, and to throw aside such of them as were obviously too large or too small for his purpose.

"You haven't got tired of playing with bricks, I see," she remarked.

"Hm," grunted Sebastian. "This was a bit of bad luck. It's a fine table, otherwise."

"Think you'll find one to fit?"

"I've tried 'em all. No good. I just keep on bringing them back, and trying again. Well, what's it like out-of-doors? I had the door open for a bit, but the dust blew in."

"It knew where to find a friend," said Lydia, drily.

"Damned hot, too," continued Sebastian, tossing a couple of wooden table-feet in the air, and catching them as a juggler catches plates. "Well, I thought I was going to do something with this." He was again ruefully observing the leg of the table which had lost its foot. "Some careless devil, you know."

"Anyhow," consoled Lydia, "it's kept you busy. And happy."

She turned from him, and climbed up to the bedroom in order to take off her hat and coat and change her dress before tea. It was strange to realise how this little scrap of talk, coming so quickly after that earlier mood of exalted sentiment, had taken the edge off her quick happiness. She was not less happy; but she was less buoyantly so. Fortunately the sweet quality of happiness is less easily disturbed than Lydia was apt to believe; and no sooner had she cast aside her outdoor clothes than she had recovered all her lightness of heart. She whistled idly as she brushed her hair, without realising that the tune which came from her lips was that of "Rule, Britannia."

That dust to which Sebastian had referred had flown into the bedroom by way of the open window, and it lay thickly everywhere. It was upon the dressing-table, the green linoleum, the rails at head and foot of those two little beds in which Lydia and Sebastian spent one third of their lives.

"Mercy!" she thought. "Just look at it. Nobody would think I ever dusted this place!"

Her finger was run along one of the bedrails, and thereafter the dusty finger received a frown for its pains. But Lydia's thoughts had fled once more from the theme of dust to that of conduct. She remained motionless in the bedroom with her head reflectively lowered, now dressed for tea, and, apparently, without any reason for delaying her descent. In reality, she was devising in secret a means by which she could introduce an account of her meeting with Ambrose. It was not easy. Finally, with no plan made, she took fright, cast one baffled look into the mirror that formed the wardrobe door, plucked open the door of the room (thereby causing that miniature explosion which always made the windows echo and the curtains fly), and ran hastily down the stairs, as light as a cat.

Sebastian had left his engrossing task, and all the little ends of wood were lying in a rough semi-circle about the spot upon which he had squatted. He was in his lair, tumbling some oddments out of a basket on to the floor. Lydia heard the noise—like that of the fall of a trayful of china—as she reached the shop.

"What's *that?*" she shouted. "You all right?"

Sebastian chuckled quietly from his corner.

"What's the matter with you?" he grumbled, when she was bending over him. "Lost your nerve, or what?"

Lydia ruffled his feathery head.

"You're in mischief, my lad," she told him.

Sebastian stood slowly upright. His face was flushed, and he breathed heavily. He put his arm about her, and kissed her ear, looking sidelong into her concerned face.

"Damned stooping!" he gasped. "What's the matter? Frightened?" He could not see the colour of his own cheeks, nor the dark whites of his eyes. "Oh, it's nothing. If *you* were to stoop, you'd get crimson. 'It's only human nature,' as the girl said to the policeman who caught her wearing his wife's

fur coat. By the way, you look pretty pleased with yourself. All go well at the last? No wailing? Bouquets and buckets? Or did you see somebody you knew?"

The devil! Lydia's heart stopped; then it jumped. How could he have known, or guessed? Had she no power to keep a secret? Or was his insight merely too good for her? Or was he just trying to divert her attention from his heart? Yes, but this was the opening for which she might vainly have sought in half-an-hour's talk.

"Yes," she answered, immediately. "I did. First of all, the old dears were as calm as could be; but they broke down at the last. Mum actually swore! Then, I went into Hyde Park, and there . . . I met the one you call my *friend*."

It was Lydia's turn now to be observant, and with fluttering heart she took note of the way in which her news was received.

Sebastian's brows twitched. He did not pretend to misunderstand her.

"What—young Thayer?" he demanded, in a matter-of-fact voice. He became very quiet. After the slightest pause, he added: "What was *he* doing, then?"

"That was what *I* wanted to know. I hadn't seen him for weeks."

Sebastian assumed an expression of surprise.

"Oh," said he. "Hasn't he been in lately? I hadn't noticed."

It was not at all a convincing effort. He turned away from Lydia, whose spirits rose again, to a dangerous height, at this visible display of something that was not quite indifference.

"Liar!" she said, rallyingly. "You know you've missed him as much as I have!"

"Oh, have I?" snapped Sebastian. "And have you?"

"Well, I thought he might be ill. And he *has* been."

"Hm," said Sebastian. "No stamina." She could tell that he was puzzled at her daring. Yes, but *one* of them had to be

puzzled; and if, for once, it was not herself, surely that was all to the good? It was a change, anyway. There was a kind of madness of high spirits in Lydia at this moment. She did not know the cause of it. She only knew that she was tantalising Sebastian. When he stood blinking his eyelashes at her she came suddenly close to him, presenting herself roguishly, as it appeared, to be kissed. "Hm," said Sebastian again, as he kissed her. He was deep in thought.

But Lydia had left him. And as she burst into the kitchen, and saw the shadow of the grating in the pavement above the little area, she had her head raised as if to catch the last glimpse of the afternoon light. The smile of mischief and happiness was still upon her lips, and every movement betokened a heart that was both light and free.

II

All that evening Lydia thought of her meeting with Ambrose and wove charm into her memories of him. She sat with a book in her hands; but although she turned its pages at intervals, and although her eyes skimmed the words which were printed upon those pages, she had no knowledge of their meaning. Ambrose was present in her imagination; and if any other element distracted her from the dream in which she was indulging it was a knowledge that Sebastian, smoking occasional cigarettes at the other side of the fireplace, his chin resting upon the back of one hand, might be similarly engaged in thinking of Ambrose. And Sebastian's thoughts of Ambrose would be different from her own. Lydia roused herself to smile at the difference, and its origin.

And at night she dreamed of him. Only her dreams were uncomfortable, and once she awoke in the darkness, and listened for a while to that sparse traffic, because she had dreamed that Ambrose had called her, despairingly, over and

over again. She lay for a time quite wakeful, until the throbbing of her heart subsided, and then once again slept—this time until morning. And when morning came she was as full of happiness as ever. How odd it was, she told herself, that she should feel so suddenly cheerful, merely as a result of meeting a boy who had been so silly as to think evil of her!

"As if I was grateful to him!" she thought. "No, it isn't that I'm grateful. Only that I'm glad it's over. I shouldn't like *anybody* to go on thinking badly of me." For a time, those words satisfied her. But not for long. "I'm trying to bamboozle myself!" she asserted, very definitely. "And that's what that is. Nothing else. The fact is that I'm a minx. Got it?" In spite of this charge, which startled her for a moment, Lydia remained as cheerful as before, because she was not in fact listening very attentively to her own thoughts, but had her ear strained to catch the sound of a striking clock out of doors.

Seven! In a moment she was out of bed. Sebastian was lying upon his back. Good God! how white he looked! She listened, and then smiled with relief. He was breathing regularly. But his nose had seemed to stick up so sharp and pale, and his brow had been so clear, that the dread which always lurked at the bottom of her consciousness had sprung to the surface. Silently she put on her dressing-gown, opened the door, and closed it behind her. There was something in the shuttered darkness of the shop, with all these grotesque shadows rising and humping strangely at every turn, that always made her quake and feel adventurous. She remembered scenes upon the stage where shutters had been folded back, or blinds drawn, and where strange doings had occurred. Strange doings!

Would the kettle never boil? There was no power in the gas this morning! Sickening stuff! Only fit for taking away people's lives. Old people, and those who had got to the end of everything. She wondered how Dad and Mum were get-

ting on. How had they liked the sea voyage? They had had a night in their new home. Was it strange to them? Were they up now? Perhaps there would be a letter. What rovers they were! Poor old Mum, sticking it to the last, and then breaking out: she'd be so ashamed of herself. She'd never forget it, probably. Lydia could see again the crowd at Victoria, and the tall man in tweeds, and the train moving, and the fluttering of hands and handkerchiefs. And those two frightened faces! Poor old things!

"Come on!" she admonished the kettle. It sent out a little promising spurt of steam. That was what you had to do with kettles: frighten them. Kettles were like men. A little bullying did them a world of good. That was really the way she had convinced Ambrose—calling him a silly. Men hated to be thought ridiculous worse than anything on earth. But, as to Ambrose, it only showed that you could be as innocent as possible, and a man would always think the worst of you. And the better the man, the worse he thought. It was his own suppressed wickedness coming out! Of course, when he thought so badly, it was probably because he——"

Psychology was interrupted. The kettle gushed forth a cloud of steam. And Lydia, whipping it off, scalded the teapot for Sebastian's early cup, forgetting to complete her sentence regarding the cause of a good man's really diabolically unjust suspicions of a good woman.

III

Two days later, there *was* a letter. It recorded safe arrival, the state of the English Channel, the difference of French trains from English, a dislike of French food, and a promise to write again when things were more settled. There was no hint of excitement or of new experience. Lydia had not expected it. She knew that her mother was not an expressive

letter-writer, able to describe with happy touches the oddity of new scenes and strange people. Such a gift is so rare that it always commands something of the envy which we accord to genius. Yet she was disappointed with the letter. It told her nothing of their situation, nothing of Mr. Gerard, nothing which enabled her to picture them to herself going, coming, sleeping, or awake. Nothing about the house. Nothing about hills and valleys, roads and vehicles. Only: "the French cooking is horrible everything butter and the soup we had well it was warm water with bits of bread floating." No more than that. Apparently Charlotte had neither eyes nor ears, but only a proud and ineffective stomach.

Lydia handed the letter across the table to Sebastian, who read it at a glance and flipped the sheet upon its return journey with a scornful forefinger.

"They'll be back again in six months," he said, drily. "She hates it."

Lydia demurred.

"It's only her way. If they hated it she'd have said so. I believe she's as happy as a kitten. I think she thinks she's going to teach the French how to cook. Roast beef and suet puddings. Substantial, nourishing food. That's one of the things Mr. Gerard's supposed to want."

"Hm," said Sebastian. "De gustibus! Which means, you never know when you're well off. Yes, I wonder who he *is*." But, as if he did not in fact wonder anything of the kind, he resumed the reading of his newspaper. He was gloomy this morning, as he had been overnight. And when he had finished eating his breakfast he rose immediately from the table and went upstairs to open the shop. He had never seen Gerard, and if he remembered what he had heard of him gave no sign that he did so.

Left alone, Lydia re-read the letter, set it upon the mantel-

shelf, behind the clock, and began to clear away. She, too, wondered who Mr. Gerard was. She also wondered if he would like her mother's cooking, which she remembered of old. A number of doubts crossed her mind. Perhaps, after all, they *would* be back in six months.

An hour later, she was returning home with her marketing, when she saw a girl of about fifteen standing back upon the pavement outside Sebastian's shop, shading her eyes with her hand, and looking up as if to find a number. And as Lydia came abreast of her the girl, who had an envelope in her hand, pushed past, entered the shop, put down her envelope upon a table, and ran out again without saying anything. She was a meagre child with home-cut hair which stuck raggedly out from under her hat. Lydia had only a glimpse of a pinched face and a tiny nose above a wide mouth, a very short skirt that showed bony knees, and a straw hat with what had been a white ribband.

"What a smart child!" she said to herself, and picked up the envelope from where it lay upon the table. "Here's a letter, Sebastian. Oh, it's for *me*. Now who's that from?"

The writing was in pencil, and the letter was directed simply to "Mrs. Rowe." Within the envelope was a single sheet of notepaper, upon which was written, also in pencil, and in a sprawling hand, without a beginning:

"I am ill and in Hell. Can you come? Ambrose."

Above, in the same handwriting, was an address in Hampstead.

"What is it?" asked Sebastian, who had been upon his way to the front of the shop at her entry. "Who's it from?"

"It's from that boy," answered Lydia, still holding the letter in her hand.

"What sauce!" Sebastian read the scrambled words. "What, does he think you're a nurse?"

Lydia looked at him, smiling strangely.

"Perhaps he does," she answered in a low tone. "He's all alone."

"You won't go, will you?" Sebastian's voice was sharpened: it was almost shrill. Colour had risen to his cheeks. "These boys! They think they've only got to command——"

Lydia's pulse had quickened. She looked again at the note.

"Why, of course I shall go," she said, quite breathless. Then she caught sight of Sebastian's expression, as black as a thundercloud. "You don't mind my going, do you?"

Confronted with that direct question, and satisfied that it held no irony, Sebastian could only frown.

"Well, what I feel——" he began. "If you start making yourself a nurse for him——" Then his honesty was too strong for him. He ruffled his hair with an impatient sweep of that nervous hand. "Damn the boy's eyes!" he muttered. "It's a fine thing if he can send his commands like that! A fine thing, I *must* say! No, no; of course I don't mind, Lydia. If you feel that you want to go. It's for you to decide. But——" Shrugging, he stamped off to the back of the shop. Lydia heard him clearing his throat as if he were choking.

IV

Lunch was eaten in silence. Opposite to her at the table Lydia saw a very melancholy face, and above Sebastian's eyes the little nick of a set frown. But a kind of obstinacy which she could not fathom had come upon her, and she was as silent as he, making no attempt to conquer this strange sulkiness. Nor would she admit that Sebastian had any justification for his mood. Underneath obstinacy was exasperation; and underneath exasperation—who could tell what chafings of the spirit? He had no right to be jealous. When he had any occasion for jealousy, she would tell him. Until then, such fuss as this was

worse than silly. She supposed he was thinking all sorts of things about her. Soon Lydia's frown was as heavy as Sebastian's. But her heart was not as sore. She was glad when he pushed away his plate and, without a word, left the table. Glad, but her sight was blurred by a mounting sense of injury.

"Oh, Ior!" she cried at last, jumping up. "Men *are* the limit! The outside edge!"

Nevertheless it was with a feeling of guilt that she went up to the bedroom to change her dress. She crept up the kitchen stairs, exclaimed at that betraying handle, and shut the bedroom door with a sense of escape. She was strongly tempted to go out without saying anything further to Sebastian. But she would not do that. His annoyance would pass, as it always had done, and all would be as before. There never had been a sweeter temper than Sebastian's. She would call to him from the doorway.

"I'm going now, Sebastian," she said, in a clear voice.

There was no answer. Perhaps the noise of that passing omnibus had drowned either his cry or her own. The bell rang; the door was closed; Lydia was in the street.

Now the first thing was to find this boy's address! Why was her heart sinking? Anybody would think she had been affected by Sebastian's disapproval. It wasn't so. It *wasn't* so. Almost agitatedly she insisted upon that. Sebastian was old-fashioned. For a moment injustice triumphed. But only for a moment. No, he wasn't, said her experience. He was neither old-fashioned nor new-fangled. She mustn't be unfair to him, even though she were provoked. There wasn't going to be anything of that sort. Sebastian was thinking of *her*. Or he thought he was. Really, he was only jealous. And Lydia had never before gone in a direction that she knew he did not approve. Why was she going now? She could not answer.

"Well, I'm *going!*" she exclaimed irritably. "And that's all about it. See?"

She walked through the hot streets arguing with herself. She was moved, she said, by pity for a lonely boy. Finally, she said that she was going because she wanted to go. But that note of defiance was unwelcome enough, and it made her uncomfortable. She was relieved when she came to the small row of cottages to which she had been directed. And as she looked at these cottages she sniffed with distaste. This was just the sort of place that Ambrose *would* find in the course of his desperate flight. Which was number five? The worst!

The same frowsy child who had delivered the letter opened the door to Lydia's knock.

"He's ill," she said. "Ill in bed."

"I'm Mrs. Rowe. You brought a letter for me this morning. He wants to see me."

"Ow," said the child. "Arf a tick, then." She retired to a shadowed corner of the narrow passage, and Lydia heard whispering. Presently a woman came from the darkness, rubbing her hands upon a coarse apron.

"Good-afternoon," she said, suspiciously. "You want to see Mr. Thayer? He's not well. I've had to get the doctor to him. Doctor said he was to be kep' quiet. Are you the lady he wrote to? Well, I'll just *see*. Only he may be asleep. Will you wait?"

She creaked into the room opening off the passage. There was a murmur of voices, perhaps a little expostulation; then Lydia heard a feeble hail.

"Come in, come in!"

Before the woman had reappeared, Lydia had impatiently entered. The room in which she found herself was very small and square, crowded with cheap furniture, smelling as stuffy as a birdcage. The ceiling was dark, there were texts upon the walls, and a green marble clock took up the greater part of the mantelpiece. Linoleum dotted with long-haired woollen mats concealed the floor, and carpet-covered chairs were squeezed about a big dining-table with a pot of ferns upon it. Dark

curtains shut off another room, and it was from this other room that the cries came. The woman, parting the curtains, gave way to Lydia, who saw in the gloom beyond a huddled bed, and the long arms of Ambrose stretching wildly towards her.

"Thank God, you've come!" he cried aloud, almost frenzied. "I thought you'd never come. I was getting—— How are you?" He took her hand in both of his own, and gripped it.

There was no question of his illness. His cheeks were haggard, and his long hair was tossed. His cheeks were flushed; and the hands which clasped Lydia's hand so tightly were hot as if with fever. There was, too, a feverish, convulsive energy in all he did and said, followed by a relaxation to languor no less extreme.

"The doctor says he wasn't to be excited," murmured the woman.

"Oh, go away! go away!" shouted Ambrose, violently waving an arm, while he still kept tight hold of Lydia with one hand. "That woman—she drives me——"

"It's all right," whispered Lydia, with a meaning glance at the woman. "Hush. You mustn't get so excited. Good gracious me! There's a way to behave, now!"

She patted his hand, but withdrew her own. Then, having seen the woman pass beyond the curtains, perhaps to listen in concealment, she sat down upon a chair beside the bed, nodding and smiling at him. But she was in reality much alarmed by his appearance and his manner.

"You've no idea!" shouted Ambrose. "Lying here hour after hour—waiting. Waiting. Why didn't you come before? I expected you at once. I wrote because I felt I couldn't stand it any longer. I was at the limit of endurance. I said you were to come at once. I told that woman to tell the child——"

"Well, I didn't know that; but in any case I couldn't have

come earlier," continued Lydia, soothingly, "because I'd got my work to do. I came as soon as I could."

"Is she gone?" whispered Ambrose, loudly.

"Not far," answered Lydia, with a warning jerk of the head. "What is it you want to say?"

The energy had gone from him for a time. He was lying back upon his pillows, staring at her, a smile of such tranquil happiness replacing his harrassed look of an instant earlier that the change was startling.

"I love you," breathed Ambrose.

Lydia struggled for breath, for composure. No wonder Sebastian had been jealous! But she had known this all along. It was no surprise, no shock.

"Well," said she, unsteadily. "That's very nice of you."

He took no notice of her stammered effort to remain at ease, but imperiously reached out his hands towards her, close together.

"That was what I had to say," he went on. "I knew that if I didn't say it I should go off my head. You see, ever since I first saw you I've been in love with you. The first time. That was why I dropped that shepherdess. I was looking at you, and thinking about you. And that's why I didn't come to the shop. I was in love with you, and I couldn't bring myself to say so. In fact if I weren't a bit light-headed I don't expect I'd have the courage now. I'm sort of screwed up. My God! If you'd known the agony I was going through you'd have left your work. You'd have left everything——"

He ceased speaking, but his lips continued to move. He smiled, while Lydia sat beside the bed, not answering him, not looking at him. Her hands were clasped, and as she looked down she could see the fingers twisting painfully together, and the movement fascinated her, so that she could not lift her eyes, but listened breathlessly. When no further sound came from him she began to seek some kind of answer that

she could make. As she racked her brain, the little stuffy room seemed to come down upon her, dark and suffocating. Her throat closed. She struggled for breath.

"You won't get better," she whispered, "till you're out of here. You can't breathe here."

"I know. I know. It's awful. But not *here*. I didn't mean—— We'll go somewhere—you and I—together," cried Ambrose, in a low voice. "It doesn't matter where. Anywhere."

Lydia's lips trembled into a smile.

"Well!" she exclaimed. "What a boy!"

"What!" He was startled. "You're laughing at me! You are!" His face grew crimson.

"No," Lydia protested. "No; I'm not laughing. It's only my way. You know that."

"I know. You're ironic. Of course I understand. It's so stupid of me. You see, I must get away from here—quickly. But you must come, too. We'll be happy!"

Still she smiled.

"What am I to do with Sebastian?" she asked. She might have been appealing to a child. "Poor Sebastian!"

Ambrose lay staring, still very red, still tragically in earnest.

"I can't . . . I can't help Sebastian!" he managed to say. "I've thought of all that. But I can't. I'm sorry for him, of course. But you don't mean that *you* can think of him—now, at this moment! Surely you can't! Lydia!"

"I think of Sebastian all the time," murmured Lydia. "And you, too."

He was breathing quickly and loudly. As she spoke he pressed his hand to his forehead—that long, emaciated hand which she had so often noticed with gentleness and love.

"I can't *think!*" he stammered. "I can't . . . I . . . You see, I've got to get away before *he* . . . my father . . . I can't go without you. Oh, God! The thought of being without you. Now, I couldn't . . . you see I couldn't. But you say

'Sebastian.' What d'you mean? Sebastian?" He spoke wonderingly. "I don't understand."

"No," said Lydia. "You're too ill——"

"No, no, no!" he cried, very loudly. "I'm not at all too ill! And I want to know. I *must* know. What do you mean? Tell me!"

"Well, I meant that he's my husband," answered Lydia, without dryness, with simplicity. "That's all."

"You mean you don't love me."

"Yes, I love you," said Lydia, quickly. "But I love Sebastian, too."

"Oh, God!" His head rolled slowly from side to side. He was in despair. "Oh, God! You *can't* talk like that! You . . . I . . . you *must* see——"

Lydia's hands were trembling. But in her thoughts she heard, "You can't you *can't,*" over and over again. Would the trouble never end? What could she say to him? What could she do? He wasn't fit to be argued with. But she wasn't sure of herself. She was sure of nothing. Temptation slipped into her mind. If it would appease him—— Oh, no, no, no! But whatever she said or did——

"Listen," she said, no louder than a whisper. "I'm very fond of you—oh, *awfully* fond——" These were not mere words. They sounded mere words. The more she stressed them, the more they sounded like an effort to exaggerate kindness. She stopped speaking.

"It's no good!" Lydia heard him muttering savagely to himself. He half raised his body in the bed, with sudden vehement ferocity. His eyes gleamed. She thought he was going to spring out, to strike her.

"No, Ambrose!" she cried, in fear, but with a desperate air of calm.

He sank back again, breathing loudly. His eyes were closed.

"Not *that* way?" he asked, in a stifled voice. "As a kid, eh?"

"I don't know," answered Lydia, as one in a dream. "Perhaps." Long afterwards, and between her teeth: "Not enough to let Sebastian go."

They were both silent. The walls came closer, crushing them. There was a darkness in the room. Lydia felt that she was growing faint. She moved in her chair, struggling against this ugly, dark faintness with which she was threatened. And as she moved she seemed to recover her strength. The numbness was passing. What, had he cast a spell upon her? The magician! But she had moved. She was repossessed of herself, and no longer afraid of him or dreaming.

"I don't know what to say to you, Ambrose," she continued, with urgent sincerity. "I wish I did. Oh, I wish I did."

He did not answer. He was too deep in his own morose thoughts.

At the door of the cottage Lydia heard a knocking. There was more whispered conversation. The woman reappeared, followed by a short, burly figure. The doctor. She sank back in her chair.

CHAPTER TWELVE: DILEMMA

I

AFTERWARDS, she had only a vague memory of the sturdy little doctor's few words, her own flight, the crying out of Ambrose at her going, and the stumbled journey home, during which she had no knowledge of the streets through which she passed, and owed her life to the daylight and the slightness of traffic. When she reached home she called out to Sebastian, and went straight up to the bedroom. She had never been so unhappy. Seating herself upon the edge of the bed, she began to peel off her gloves; and when she had done that she threw her hat aside. But for a long time subsequently she did not stir.

"I'm not," she said, distinctly. "I thought I was; and I'm not. It's funny." Then: "No, I always said I wasn't sure. I'm not sure, *now*. Only I'm not going to let Sebastian down. Pooh, swagger! Aren't I a fool! And a liar. You say that sort of thing: you don't mean it. Hypocrite. It just *sounds* well. But it's true: I couldn't let Sebastian go. I'm fond of him. I'm used to him: that's what it is. No, more than that. Besides, I'm frightened."

Whatever her thoughts were in the next few minutes, they presented themselves in a form so confused that she could not disentangle them. But as if, somewhere within, a judgment more perceptive than her consciousness was at work, she suddenly added:

"No, I'm not frightened. At least, I shouldn't be, if——"

So much was clear. She was not to fail Sebastian; but she had already failed Ambrose, and was to do it again. That temptation which had come earlier made a second appearance. Could she not do something to make him happy? What? There was only one thing that would make him happy. And that for a time. Until he found out. Until Sebastian found

out. There were many women—— Oh, she was wicked! *They* were wicked. They were self-indulgent, and pretended to be kind. You read it in their greedy mouths and sleek cheeks. But they all pretended kindness. Everybody pretended kindness. Either that, or she was abnormally cold. Yes, she was cold. How cold she felt to Sebastian, only she herself knew; but as to Ambrose—— Lydia smiled, pityingly, lovingly. Slowly she picked up the discarded gloves, and pulled the fingers to stretch them. Poor Ambrose! He was so sweet, so young, that he made her heart soft. And Sebastian was so sweet, so old, that he, too, softened her heart, and weakened her will. At neither could she bear to strike a blow. They were defenceless.

Lydia rose to her feet, put away the gloves, and began mechanically to tidy her hair before the mirror. The truth was that she was afraid to go downstairs and face Sebastian. He would see in her face the shadow of fear, of guilt, which she had just surprised there. He would guess. She didn't want him to know what went on in her heart. When she did not herself know, it was uncanny; when, as now, she had some inkling, she shrank with a sense of nakedness. Besides, it was going to be difficult otherwise.

At last the descent could be postponed no longer. She ran down the stairs, and could see Sebastian hunched up in his little corner. It was impossible to tell, by such a glance, whether he was writing or reading or only sitting and thinking; but the droop of his shoulders was an involuntary reproach to her. She ran onward, without staying. But the glimpse had not lightened her burden. On the contrary.

"Yes, well, I want a shoulder to lean on, myself," sighed Lydia, as she busied herself with preparations for tea. "Only there isn't one. People like me don't get shoulders to lean on. But they want them, all the same—sometimes. When they're rattled. I'm rattled. That's what it is!" She could not forget

the look Ambrose had given her at the last, and it moved her almost to tears. How could she have the heart to refuse him? Was she to blame? What *was* this love, then? "What a cruel beast I am!" she thought. Then: "If I could only run away!" Finally: "If I could only run away from them both! But I can't, ever."

She moved about the kitchen wearily, hearing above her head the rumble of traffic and the trampling of the passers. All the people who walked so fast were going somewhere. Only she, imprisoned here, went nowhere, and died slowly from atrophy of the heart and the will.

"I'm no good," Lydia said aloud, to herself. "I'm only a beast. And a fool." She was beyond tears, beyond vexation, and had passed into a kind of hopeless misery from which it seemed that nothing could rouse her.

II

When Sebastian came down to tea a single glance at his face showed that he was going to try and treat the matter lightly; but he was too honest by nature to make a success of his effort. He kept his eyes averted as he entered the kitchen, forced himself to look at Lydia (no doubt with a similar inward quaking to that which she felt), and took a chair.

"Well, how did you find the boy?" he asked, genially enough.

Lydia's heart gave a bound. What a good sort he was! Oh, this lifted a load from her mind!

"He's ill. Worse than I thought. He's *really* ill," she said. "And lying in a wretched little room, smaller than this, all dark. . . . It makes you miserable to see him."

Was she too eager? Well, it was so difficult to repress her thankfulness and her sense of trouble. She saw Sebastian's lips tighten.

"He ought to go home again," he said, obstinately. "That's the cure for that."

"You know his father's been poking among his papers," objected Lydia. "He told me so the other day. That's the reason he left home."

"He oughtn't to have any papers," said Sebastian. "What papers are they?" At Lydia's shaken head of ignorance he continued: "Things are very serious to boys of his type and age. They get over them. He'll go back in time. Better now than later. There seems to be plenty of money there."

"Perhaps so. Only he's not happy. He's told me several funny things."

"Trying to interest you," said Sebastian, sourly.

"I don't think he'll go back. But, oh, Sebastian, if you saw that little room he's in! I can't get it out of my head!"

This was not true: she was substituting the room for Ambrose. His face haunted her. But she was compelled to seek an escape for her thoughts. Sebastian brooded awhile upon that speech. He might have been turning it over and over in his mind. Nay, he must have been doing this; for his next words were in answer to a suggestion which he thought he had discovered in it.

"Well, there's no place *here* for him," he said, shortly.

Lydia jumped.

"Nobody said there was," she retorted. "I'm only saying what a place he's in——"

"Oh, that's all right." Sebastian was ashamed of himself. "Well, I'm sorry for him; but it doesn't seem to be any business of ours. Not really, I mean."

I wonder if Mr. Gerard would help him, thought Lydia. How odd that the notion should come! It fled instantly.

"No," she replied to Sebastian. "But all the same——"

"You can't manage other people's lives for them. They don't thank you for trying to."

"No," said Lydia, thinking: If Ambrose wasn't jealous of Mr. Gerard . . . And if Sebastian wasn't jealous of Ambrose . . . In spite of her distress, the nature of man caused Lydia to smile faintly.

"You don't believe me," suggested Sebastian, tartly. "Oh, well, you'll learn."

"Yes, I believe you." Lydia turned her eyes full upon Sebastian, impatient at his persistent egoism. "Only I don't see what it's got to do with what I've said. I haven't suggested doing anything for Ambrose. I haven't said anything to him, except coldness. So I don't see why you should think I'm trying to adopt him."

She saw Sebastian's pallor give way to a dusky pinkness. But she could not check the words.

"Oh, adopt——" muttered Sebastian. Suddenly he jumped up from the table, so violently that he caused his chair to stagger across the kitchen. And as he stood by the table he seized its edge with both his hands, and, pulling and shoving with headstrong ferocity, he caused it to jump, and even moved it several inches. His cheeks were a deep crimson now; his teeth were showing. He had lost his temper. In a shrill voice which Lydia had never heard before, he cried out: "I tell you I will *not* be bothered about that callow little fool! Let him go! Let him go! I'm tired of him. I'm tired of him!"

Lydia, quite white, was horrified by this incoherence. And Sebastian, recovering his temper as quickly as he had lost it, stood in silence, the colour fading from his cheeks. They remained staring at each other in this fashion for almost a minute; at the end of which time both looked uncomfortably away, and Sebastian, after feeling behind him for his chair, stooped and gathered it from where it lay upon its side at the end of the kitchen. He sat down again at the table. With an effort that Lydia knew to be extraordinary, and with his eyes lowered, he said:

"Sorry, old girl. I forgot myself."

A pause.

"It was me," answered Lydia, in the same dry tone. "We've both been through something."

"I bet we have," muttered Sebastian.

Nothing more was said during the meal; but as he passed her upon his way upstairs he placed his hands lightly upon her two shoulders. Braced for the kiss which she supposed she was to receive, and unconscious of the instinctive flinching which the unexpected preliminary to a caress had caused, Lydia felt the approach of his face to her own. But he did not kiss her. Instead, the pressure upon her shoulders increased for an instant, until it hurt, and was as instantly removed. Sebastian's face was no longer near. He had gone. The door behind her was closed. Lydia heard his shuffling steps climbing the stairs; then the squeaking of the door handle above; then nothing more from within the building.

III

She had the next day alone, and was glad to be alone, since loneliness gave her the opportunity to face very clearly some of her problems. It was no good, she told herself, trying to pretend that everything had been settled by her refusal of Ambrose's suggestion, and by Sebastian's explosion of temper. It was all there, ready to spring out upon her at the shortest warning. Sebastian, Ambrose . . . Thank goodness she did not need to keep still, but could walk about, even though it was only in a restricted space, between Sebastian's desk and the shop door. Nervous impatience caused her to need the power of movement. From time to time she was worked up to such a pitch that she beat her clenched fists together in hysteria; but immediately afterwards she was cool again, and

no person who then entered the shop could have supposed that she was undergoing the torture of self-examination.

First, her conscience reproached her for much that she had done. She was sorry and ashamed for it. But in other respects she was neither sorry nor ashamed: she was discontented.

"I was happy till he came," she said. "It was his coming that made me unsettled. I remember. I saw him peeping at me that night, when he was supposed to be listening to Sebastian, when I got in late. After the accident. But Sebastian's just as bad, for if he hadn't suddenly got jealous I should never have noticed anything. Only when he started on me . . . What a liar I am! What a liar! I tell myself all sorts of lies. Well, what's the truth, then? Did I go out cradle-snatching? Is that what I did? Not quite. Oh, it just *happened*: why waste time arguing? Let men do that. And I wanted Ambrose to—well, be interested in me. Not what he's done. Well, perhaps be just a bit keen . . . Why not? And now—oh, I don't know what I want. I'm *not* in love with him. Or am I?" Impossible to question the decisive shaking of her head. She was not in love with Ambrose. Yet she loved him. That was funny. "Well, then, Sebastian!" Her head did not shake in answer to that doubt. "Seems peculiar to ask yourself if you're fond of your husband. But I suppose it's 'done.' Poor Sebastian! He's had something to put up with. And so have I!" interrupted her impatient self. "Well, what if I *have*? What's the matter with it?" she answered herself. There was no protest. There was only a sensation as if her self had shrugged its shoulders. Lydia did likewise. She shrugged her shoulders. You couldn't have perfection in this world; and it was no good expecting it, or thinking you'd got a right to it.

A moment later, fury broke out again. What was she to do? She couldn't mention Ambrose to Sebastian. Not after what had happened at tea-time. That savage shoving of the table. He meant it. And besides, it wasn't fair to him. She couldn't

leave Ambrose in that place, with those awful people, in the darkness and horror of that little bedroom. She couldn't. He'd die. But if she went again, he'd think she was weakening. He'd begin again to say they must go away together. Talking about love . . . Did she want him to begin again? To make love to her in his way? Not there. Not in that ugly little hole of a room, with a woman listening! The thought of it stifled her. Well, then; not there. Anywhere else? "Ah, don't ask me!" cried Lydia. "It's not safe! I'd say anything!" Poor Ambrose. She laughed a little at him. Something ridiculous, and lovable, about him. As with Sebastian, so with Ambrose, something ridiculous, to be protected. "Poor lambs, both of them!" she murmured. "He's helpless. He's easy to resist. They both are. They make me feel an old experienced wicked woman. I oughtn't to feel like that. Not about either of them. It's wrong. It's—what *is* the matter with me? Can't say I'm very struck on myself! But perhaps I am. You never know."

The mixture of sincerity and insincerity in this monologue dispirited Lydia, who did not realise the diversity of thought to which the most virtuous are prone. She could snatch here and there at something that was native to herself; but no analysis could reach the bottom of her feeling.

"Well, I don't want him, and yet I want him; and that makes me a cold coquette," she exclaimed once. "And I feel like his mother. And if I'd met him before I'd met Sebastian I'd have married him and made a man of him. . . . But I've got one child-husband. Yes, but I *can't* leave him there. Don't you see that? He'll be expecting me. I said I'd go. And there he is, suffocating. And I can't go. I can't, because I'm in charge of the shop. I bet Sebastian's chuckling at that. He knows I can't get out . . .

"Can't I, though! Can't I? What about Mother Way?"

Such a thing as this had never been known before; but desperate needs provoke desperate remedies. Excitedly, Lydia

slapped her hand down upon Sebastian's desk, so that the ink jumped in the inkpot, and the shabby old books that lay there in a pile shuffled before settling down again to their peculiar coma.

IV

She knew that she must hurry, so as to be home again before there was a likelihood of Sebastian's return; and although the afternoon was extremely warm she ran a part of the way. Feeling hot and dusty, she toiled up the road from the tramway terminus at Hampstead, and so to that wider and perhaps steeper road which leads towards the Flagstaff upon the height. A glance at her watch alarmed her. She must not stay, whatever Ambrose said. He would have to understand. She would explain. She wanted to be home in time for Sebastian because he might not believe how suddenly the impulse had come to her to leave the shop in Mrs. Way's charge.

How hot it was! Her heart was pounding. She was sure that her cheeks must be fiery. Oh, dear, what a journey! Some emotion impelled her to go forward, in spite of an increasing timidity. She had once faltered, and made as if to go home without visiting that stuffy cottage; but the inclination had been conquered. She was nearly at the end of her journey. One more hill——

And yet it took a lifetime to reach the cottage; and Lydia's hand was heavy and uncertain as old age itself when she raised the ugly little black shiny knocker. As she waited, she had the sense of being watched, and saw the curtains moved. What, was Ambrose up? Within doors there was the sound of a woman's voice, calling. Lydia listened. All she heard was: "Nancy! Nance!" Why, what was happening? The delay made her impatient. She grew a little alarmed. If Ambrose should be——

"Yes?" A thin voice at her elbow caused Lydia to jump. "Oh, Mr. Thayer—he's not here, Mrs. Rowe. He's gone." It was the little girl who had brought the letter.

"Gone? When did he go? He wasn't *fit* to go!"

The child nodded.

"No, he wasn't. But he upped and went. We said he wasn't to, and Muvver sent me for the doctor, but time I got back he'd gone. Dunno where. Dunno nothink."

"Sure?" asked Lydia, with a dry look.

"No, it's the truth. Muvver don't know, neither. He took his things. He took his little china figure. . ."

"Well!" Lydia's amazement was complete. "No reason? No letters? No message?" Again the shaken head. "Well, it's very strange. But, however, if you say so——" She searched the child's face for a glimmer of falsehood; but it was not to be seen. She believed what she had been told.

So she had come in vain. That wild dash through the hot streets had been to no purpose. What had happened? Where was Ambrose? His state of mind had been such that she was very much frightened. Why had she not humoured him? It would have been so easy!

"Oh, I'm a fool!" declared Lydia, walking slowly along past the other cottages. "I've done no good. I've done harm! What's come of him? Where is he?" She was too bewildered to notice how late the hour was. She was not thinking of Sebastian or of herself; but solely of Ambrose. If he had left this place, where had he gone? And in what mood? What had been his thought of her? Did he hate her? Did he feel that she had betrayed him?

In such turmoil of thought, Lydia wandered disconsolately down the narrow hill upon which the cottages were set. As she reached a turn in the hill she caught sight of the figure of a man who was slowly ascending. A man in a top hat and

frock coat. His shoulders were bent in the effort required to mount the hill, and she could not see his face until they were almost eye to eye, when she was forced to step into the roadway to avoid being elbowed there. Recognition at this point was mutual, for the stranger's face grew bleak; but neither showed any other sign, and Lydia began now to hurry homeward. As she hurried, however, she stopped sharply, and turned to look after that frock-coated figure. She remembered the occasion upon which she had seen him before. He had come into the shop the day that Ambrose passed in such distraction. She had disliked him, and had been insulted by him; but she had not known his name. She now knew it.

V

It was as Lydia had feared. Sebastian had reached home before she arrived. He was in the shop as she entered, walking frantically from one end of it to the other. She had never previously seen him white with anger; but he had been waiting for ten minutes, for quarter-of-an-hour, and he was crazy with suspense and self-torment. Hurrying in breathlessly, Lydia started at sight of him and stood confused. It needed no quickness to perceive his stormy temper, and as she gazed her own temper, roused and goaded by fear for Ambrose and a sense of her double negligence, leapt out of control. She faced Sebastian.

A gentle word from him, and Lydia's anger would have died; it was otherwise with Sebastian. He had lashed himself to such fury that he could not have been restrained by any difference in her mood. Defiance and humility would alike have failed. But when he saw defiance—that rueful defiance which was so plainly to be read in Lydia's raised chin and sparkling eye—he stopped in his ferocious pacing.

Both were breathing quickly in this encounter of mutual dislike and mutual contempt. Both were brimming with every bitter thought stored in five years of married life.

"Here you are then!" quivered Sebastian, in a shrill voice. It was shockingly the voice of an old man. "Where on earth have you been?"

"If you ask me like that," cried Lydia, "I shan't tell you."

"It's not necessary. I know. I came home here——"

"You found Mother Way."

Sebastian was choking.

"I did indeed!" he said. "What good was she! Just imagine! Leaving *her!*"

"Well, she was the only one I could think of. I had to go out."

"Had. Ridiculous nonsense! I never *heard* of such a thing. I never *heard* of such a thing!"

"Didn't you?" drawled Lydia. She could hardly bring herself to speak. Her tone represented a struggle, but it sounded as if she were being deliberately impudent.

"Good God!" exclaimed Sebastian, beside himself. "The moment my back's turned!" He was trembling so violently that Lydia could see the convulsive movements of his hands. He would have been ridiculous if he had not been in such pain.

"Oh, don't be silly!" Lydia cried. "What's wrong, then? Something wrong?"

"Yes, *you're* wrong. . . . I trusted you——"

"Well? I tell you I had to go out."

"Rot!" he cried savagely. "You don't know what you're doing. You don't. You're out of your mind."

"Oh, don't be a fool!" shouted Lydia. "You're a proper one to say that!"

She went to the foot of the stairs.

"You know where I've been?" she asked, defiantly. "He's gone. I've not seen him."

"As if I should believe that!" cried Sebastian. "Deceiving me right and left——"

Lydia shrugged; but she looked very steadily at him.

"Is that what you think of me?" she said, slowly. Her anger was leaving her. Something far more terrible was replacing it—a coolness of distaste for Sebastian. "It's as well to know." She began to mount the stairs. "I'm sorry for you, Sebastian. You're worse off than I am."

She could see his slight figure shaken with the stress of uncontrolled anger. But he was beginning to recover. His cheeks were less livid than they had been; his hands were still. He did not speak; and Lydia crept painfully up to the bedroom, pausing from unsteadiness at intervals, and holding the stair-rail; but at last reaching her goal before she lost all that pride which had restrained until then the flood of her bitter tears.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE CHASTE WIFE

I

"I SHAN'T be late to-day," Sebastian said, constrainedly. "I ought to be back by three."

"All right." Lydia, who had been bending over the kitchen table reading a cookery recipe in a torn sheet of newspaper which lay there, looked across her shoulder, and saw him go. She heard the shop door-bell ring, and then heard the door jolt as it was closed. It was a relief to her that he should have gone out. They were both subdued this morning, sorry for the outburst of the previous afternoon, and ashamed of it; but the original feelings continued to rankle, and it was better that they should be apart. During the whole morning, Sebastian had been creeping about very quietly, glancing timidly at her, ruffling his hair, as if he wished to make it up; but Lydia could read in his set lips a persistence of anger and suspicion.

"All of which I've *bought*," she acknowledged. "And I know it."

But she said nothing of the kind to Sebastian, because towards him her heart was hard. It was one thing to agree that she had justified anger and suspicion: it was another to forgive him for being suspicious and angry. The cold, arrogant Lydia, vying with the gentle, kind Lydia, was in revolt. But she could have been won by Sebastian's sweetness. Never by his timidities.

After a while, having completed the mechanical reading of the cookery recipe, which was already jumbled in her mind with other, more pressing matters, Lydia went up to the shop. She had still her beds to make and the bedroom to sweep and dust, but she was conscious of lassitude. The day was sultry. By afternoon, perhaps, there would be a storm. She thought she would sit in the twilight of Sebastian's desk. Perhaps that would check her headache.

This was where she had left Mother Way yesterday. What had Sebastian said to Mother Way? He'd sent her off. He wouldn't have said much. She'd have seen he was angry, very likely; but Sebastian would not discuss with her any fault of Lydia's. She was sure of it. He *was* angry. In a fume. She'd never seen him like that, in all the six years . . . What an idiot the man was, to think . . . Yes, but with *her!*

"Why, he's as safe as houses," Lydia thought proudly to herself. "I'm not that sort at all." Then: "Aren't I?" What was it she had said to that horrible man, Ambrose's father?

Where *was* the boy? Why didn't he come? Or send? She was impatient for him, and would be until she knew he was in safety.

An hour passed. Out-of-doors a few great drops of rain had fallen, but they had quickly dried, and the heat was as considerable as ever. Lydia, irked by the knowledge that her beds were yet unmade, had run up to the first floor, had made them, swept, and dusted, all the time alert for any sound below, and at length had descended, hearing the door-bell. The postman. But he had brought only a picture postcard from her mother. Nothing from Ambrose. She had hardly the patience to read her mother's card, which bore the words in pencil: "This is Calais where we arrived." As the picture, which did not look very interesting, bore an inscription "Calais," Charlotte's words were superfluous. Nevertheless, Lydia closely scanned the picture, peering into all its corners.

"Yes, but why didn't Mum say what she was feeling?" Didn't anybody ever do that?"

Lydia impatiently threw the card upon the little pile of papers in the corner of Sebastian's desk. Then she wondered if he still kept among those papers the passport photograph of herself which she had seen upon a former occasion. No; it was not there. Had Sebastian destroyed it? That was ominous. He might have torn it up in temper; but on the other hand

he might have done it deliberately, because he had ceased to love her. She sought again. No, it was gone. But she found a sheet of paper upon which she recognised Sebastian's writing. A letter, half-finished! He had begun it, had been interrupted —probably by herself, had pushed it into the pile.

"What a Parker I am!" thought Lydia, self-accusingly. But who could resist such a temptation? For the letter was addressed to her mother! "What's he writing to *her* about?"

"Dear Mrs. Cottar," the letter began. "We were both very glad to hear of your safe arrival, and I expect Lydia will be writing to you herself. But what I want to say is something in the nature——" Some words here were deleted. Lydia's eye slipped to the next legible sentence. "If you are comfortable where you are, I am wondering if you could either invite Lydia to stay *with you* or get her some sort of lodging in the immediate neighbourhood. She badly needs a——" The letter broke off abruptly. The words "needs a" were blurred, as if they had been hastily written and as if they had been blotted as the sheet was hidden.

"Whew!" whistled Lydia. "So that's the idea, is it!"

He wanted to get her away! He was bent upon it! Her memory flew to the passports upstairs. But she would not go. She was not going to leave him! He needn't think it. To go to France, eh? . . . It was rather attractive. But to Mr. Gerard's: no! Why not? Lydia could not say. Her mind slithered away from an explanation. Oh, well, not at that man's . . . She was quite firm about that. It would not "do."

"In any case, I'm not going to be sent about like a parcel!" she said aloud.

Why could not Sebastian have spoken to her of this, before writing to her mother. The answer came pat. They had not been upon terms which allowed it. He must have begun to write the letter during the previous evening. So *that* was what he'd schemed, was it! He'd been doing that either before

supper or before she had called him to bed. Artful little man! Lydia's heart softened to him. She reread the fragment. It seemed to her that all the writing showed haste and agitation; and the fact did not surprise her. What did surprise her was that even in the height of his anger, or in the low spirits of exhaustion following his anger, he could still think so considerately of her. He *always* thought of her. What a reproach it was!

"Old dear!" she murmured, hiding the letter again among the other papers. "He's as good as gold." She had always known that. She could recall now many instances of his goodness, his kindness. She had forgotten them, but the revived knowledge was salutary. It began shortly to be depressing. Good as gold, he was. At last: "*I'm* not," said Lydia, in despair. "Nothing like it. I'm not good; I'm bad. Well, not *bad*, but inferior." How that dagger went home! Inferior! She hastened to ignore what she had said; and in order to do this she exaggerated her faults to a wilful extent, until she became farcical. "I'm a leech, a blood-sucker, a vampire. I feed on men. I play with them, and all the time I'm as cold as a statue. I'm inhuman." There was no satisfaction to be had from such a catalogue. Woefully, Lydia concluded: "No, I'm not. What *am* I, then? Only a fool, I expect."

She looked out from that dark corner of the shop. Clouds had for the moment given way before a breeze, and the sun was shining brightly. It caused the shop window to look quite plastered with dust. Ambrose: where *was* he? Why didn't he send some word of himself? She was frightened lest harm should have come to him.

Ting-ting—crash! As if in answer to her demand, she saw the door fly open, and fly to again before the bell had completed its usual ringing. Ambrose was there. Lydia did not hesitate. She slipped off Sebastian's chair, and ran out across

the shop, her hands extended towards him. She was laughing with relief. Words of soft reproach were bubbling to her lips. She did not heed his ghastly looks; all she cared about was that he was here, safe, alive, and desirous of seeing herself.

II

Ambrose was in the greatest excitement. Just as he had swept into the shop, he now swept towards Lydia. The movement was such an exaggeration of his ordinary plunging walk that he might well have been drinking. They met in the midst of all the heaped medley of stock, but whereas Lydia would have given him both her hands Ambrose sought awkwardly to take her in his arms; and as Lydia had been unprepared for this convulsive effort at embrace it was a moment before their hands clasped. Smothered, ineffectual—the misunderstanding was typical of their relation. Then only did she look closely at his face; and as she did so she saw that this chin and cheeks were covered with cuts, some of them an inch long, and one so dark that it must have been very deep and must have bled freely.

What had he been doing? His lips moved. His tongue seemed ceaselessly to be rolling within his mouth. His eyes stared, and were bloodshot. Pallor under sunburn made his cheeks a hideous colour.

"I've brought you——" he stammered.

"Come and sit down," said Lydia, dragging forward a chair. "You're worn out!" How dusty his shoes were! He was covered with dust, as if he had been walking for many hours. His face, besides being so much cut, had a light stubble of golden beard upon it.

"No, no!" he cried. "I can't keep still." Then he smiled. "*You* sit down," he said, pleadingly. "Yes, *you* must sit down.

But listen! I've brought you something that I want you to keep. D'you see what I mean? It's for *you*." He put his hand upon a little parcel which he had laid upon a table close by. It was very small, wrapped in brown paper, but the shape of the parcel revealed the nature of its contents. Lydia knew, without examination, that for some reason he had brought her the little statuette which had led to their first conversation.

"What are you going to do?" she demanded, full of fear. She pointed at the little parcel. "Ambrose, what's in your mind?"

Still that mouthing, as if his tongue had grown too large. His gaze wandered. It was never still.

"I'm going away. Lydia, *he* found out where I was. I had to go. Now I'm going on a longer journey. I shan't see you——"

She thought his words held a sinister threat.

"Where are you going?" she cried. She had approached him, and as she spoke she set her hand upon his wrist. As if startled, Ambrose looked down, first at the restraining hand, and then directly into Lydia's eyes.

"I . . . I don't know," he stammered. "I haven't thought. I've destroyed everything—except this." He touched the parcel. "I've come to bring it to you. That was all."

"But where are you *going*," persisted Lydia. "You *must* know. Ambrose!"

A secret look obscured his face. He was no longer the frank Ambrose of their earlier meetings, but one who prided himself upon a power of concealment.

"It might not be safe to tell you," he said, with an air of cunning.

"You're not thinking of——" She faltered. How could she put her fear into words? And she must not suggest to him something which might in his present state become an obsession. "Ambrose, I'm afraid for you. You aren't going——"

"I shan't tell you," said Ambrose, quickly. "Oh, no! If you think I'm going to tell you, so that you can tell *him*." He shook his head heavily from side to side.

"I shouldn't dream of telling your father," Lydia cried, sick with dread. Was he no longer sane? "And you must tell me what's in your mind, because you frighten me. What made you bring me this?"

Vaguely, he followed the direction of her pointing finger. She saw him stop as he looked at it, and saw the look of vagueness give way to something of the old Ambrose. His lips parted. They quivered. He looked back from the hidden porcelain figure to Lydia, with an expression of such suffering that she extended her arm until it embraced him. Ambrose, raising his hands, caught her shoulders. He drew her towards him. His head dropped. For an instant his cheek rested against Lydia's hair. She felt him trembling.

"Oh, God!" he cried, in a broken voice. "Oh, God, I can't bear it, my darling!"

"Poor boy!" she groaned, patting his shoulder. "And I'm so useless to you. Kiss me, my dear. You'll feel better."

His lips were pressed awkwardly, in moth-like flights, to her brow, to her cheek, never to her lips. He did not know how to kiss. But he shivered from head to foot, as if he had an ague; and in a moment, after one convulsive embrace, he drew his arms away, disengaged Lydia's arms from his body, and stood before her with his hands tightly clasped together.

"You're very good to me," he said. "I shall never forget you."

He spoke the words with such beauty of spirit that the tears started to Lydia's eyes. But the mood of peace which had come upon him was changed in an instant by some darting memory. His trembling increased; the curious mouthing which she had noticed at his first entry was again to be seen. He looked almost furtively at the door.

"But I must go now," he cried. "The longer I delay, the greater the danger."

"My dear, there's no danger," urged Lydia. "What danger *could* there be?" She put her arm out again, protectively.

"Danger? My God!" shouted Ambrose. "You say there's no danger! But I tell you there *is* danger. Don't you see what I mean, Lydia? Of course you don't. No, no; of course you don't. I'll tell you. Don't be frightened of me. I'm not mad. Did you think I was? I'm not. I'm all overwrought; but that's all. You see, my father wants to pretend that I *am* mad. He wants to get hold of me. My mother died in a lunatic asylum. He put her there. I say these things *can* be done. People tell you they can't; but they *can*. He found letters I'd written to you—oh, protestations! God, what a fool I was to write them. But I *had* to. You know— I . . ." He raised his hands helplessly. He looked as if he could cry.

"Well, then, if you're going away——" began Lydia.

"Far away!" he cried.

"Let me come and look after you. You're not fit to go alone. You remember what you said. Let me come too. We'll both go. You and I. . ." She was stammering, hot, half-hearted, only trying to cajole him into a little tranquillity. And, as if he knew that, Ambrose suffered her to take his hand, but he maintained his composure, closed his eyes, shook his head.

"Good-bye," he whispered. When she would have clung to his hand, to prevent his going, he raised her hand and kissed it, but would not suffer her to persuade or even to delay him. Lydia persisted; but in vain. He was bent upon taking his course, and pushed her gently away, looking back very lovingly as he went. Half-distracted, she followed him into the street, imploring him to stay, until one or two of the passers began to stop and to stare. But still Ambrose would not turn; she saw him leap across the road in front of a swiftly-moving

vehicle, and as a scream rose to her lips she saw him again, beyond the vehicle, striding unscathed into the distance, until he was lost in a crowd of moving figures. Presently she stumbled back into the shop, and stood there full of horror, until her knees seemed to give way beneath her, and she fell to the ground. She was still quite conscious, but she could not stand. She could only kneel, sprawling, and her hair dishevelled, shuddering at the vision of Ambrose's face by which she was haunted.

III

For a few moments she was unable to move; but at last, groaning, she began to pull herself upright, still kneeling upon the bare boards, and looking about her as if she were recovering from a fainting fit. The objects in the shop, from this angle, appeared quite unfamiliar; and she allowed weary eyes to rove among them, merely as a distraction for her thoughts.

"I think I shall polish that pewter," she thought, dazedly. "I ought to do something to it. Where's he gone? The poor mad creature. No, not mad. I don't know. I don't know *anything*. . ."

Somebody was there. Somebody was in the doorway of the shop, looking in. Was it Ambrose? Was it *he*? A shock of unaccustomed fear swept her. She was alone, helpless. Who was there? Struggling violently, she staggered to her feet.

Ting-ting-trrring. Faintness was making everything grey to Lydia. As long as she had been upon her knees she had preserved her consciousness by some kind of will-power; but the effort of rising had been too great. She swayed unsteadily; there was a soothing noise in her ears; grey beautiful waves that were neither sound nor light swayed enchantingly before her. . .

"You are feeling better now?" asked a soft voice in her ear.

Lydia's eyes opened. She made a sound of agreement in her

throat. "m-hm." She was still in the shop, lying upon her back on the bare boards, but something—a cushion, or a coat, was under her head, and she could feel a cold trickle of water meandering along her shoulder. She sighed very heavily, her thoughts dim, and closed her eyes again. It had been so lovely in that world of insensibility that she had great desire to drop back into it again. It had been so lovely, so. . .

Somebody was moistening her forehead and her temples with such gentleness! Who could it be? Lydia wished that this sweet dream might last for ever.

"I had rather a shock," she was murmuring thickly, explanatorily. "Rather a bad shock."

"Yes," came the soothing voice. "I know that you must have had a shock."

"I was afraid he might . . . you see what I mean . . . I thought that as he brought the little figure . . . And I'm so *cold* . . ."

"You are cold?" asked the voice. "Wait, I will get you——"

"No, no," murmured Lydia, rolling her head from side to side. "Here." She tried to indicate her heart, but her hand was heavy as lead, and dropped to her side before she could raise it properly.

"No; you are not cold," said the voice.

"Not *really* cold," whispered Lydia. "Not *really* cold." She heavily shook her head again. "But I'm sure he means to kill himself."

At those words, consciousness returned with a rush. She uttered a faint, very strangled scream. Her eyes opened again, filled with alarm. To whom was she speaking thus intimately? She must get up. She must go after Ambrose. Something must be done. At once. How sick she felt! She must get up. She couldn't. In her confusion, she spoke weepingly.

"You really *must* do something!" she said.

"Yes," said the voice. "As soon as you are better. Of course I shall do something. You had a shock, you know."

Lydia, looking straight up, saw two kind eyes above her own. She saw a man's head. It was not Sebastian's. She did not recognise that black, closely-cut hair. Her eyes wandered. They saw a straight nose, a small black moustache, two very firm, finely-chiselled lips. Memory struggled.

"You?" she gasped, incredulously.

"The man for the emergency," answered Gerard. He made a little laughing, ridiculing sound; and she saw his white teeth as he smiled.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Lydia. She did not know what it was that she said. "Oh, dear, how thankful I am it's you." Her head rolled feebly aside. She closed her eyes again, but not in time to check two feeble tears from escaping. A slow smile of relief caused her lips to tremble apart.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE RISING TIDE

I

"Lydia!" called Sebastian's voice. Lydia was down in the kitchen. It was the next afternoon, and she was making some cakes for Sebastian's tea. The kitchen was broilingly hot, and so were Lydia's cheeks.

"Hullo!" she called back.

"Here's a visitor for you. Come up!"

She snatched off her pinafore and threw it over a chair. Her hands went to her hair. By stooping, she could get a hasty glimpse of herself in a small square mirror which hung in the scullery.

"How awful I look!" she thought. But she had no time for more. She had seen that the door at the top of the kitchen stairs was open. They would be waiting for her. There was no time even to powder her nose. One-two-three-four-fourteen stairs. How well she knew them. She was in the shop.

It seemed so strange to see Gerard and Sebastian in conversation. The first time they had met! Gerard was much the taller, as well as the broader and thicker-set of the two. Sebastian looked frail by comparison. His hair was a greyish, sandy-coloured fluff; where Gerard's was as close as a blackbird's plumage—dark almost to blackness, lustrous, but without oily polish. Sebastian stood slouchingly with his hands in his pockets, and the knees of his old brown trousers bulging. His shoulders sloped. Gerard was dressed with inconspicuous neatness, but his clothes fitted him perfectly, and his shoulders were neither square nor burly, but gave pleasure to the eye. The two men seemed at a first glimpse to be friendly. They were speaking, at any rate, with ease. First one, then the other. Polite. Not guarded. How funny! Lydia had thought they would dislike each other immediately, and bristle, growling, like a pair of antipathetic dogs. Surely Gerard had given her

that impression? But then, who could have disliked Sebastian? As to Gerard, she had no doubt he was clever enough for anything. He was much cleverer than Sebastian, and would be able to make rings round him—diabolically—if it came to a quarrel. Not but what Sebastian could scratch. Only you always felt defensive about your own man, and thought everybody was cleverer than he. Still this was true, in spite of the fact that Gerard *was* kind, and that he *did* look agreeable this morning. It was such a relief to Lydia to see them cordial that she stayed an instant, enjoying the comedy.

But Gerard had seen her. He became grave, whereas a moment earlier, in speaking to Sebastian, he had been listening appreciatively, it had seemed, to a drollery. "He's insincere!" thought Lydia. "I knew it!"

"How d'you do?" Gerard's quick eyes expressed very much more than his tongue. It was as if he had said: "I like you. I am here again. I feel tremendously daring, and almost rather wicked, at being here. I like your husband; but he is not my sort. Aren't I clever to have engaged him in friendly conversation? But I'm puzzled to know how much you have told him of yesterday's business, and in fact of any business whatever. However, since you are here, and looking so charming, I am entirely at ease."

All this and more was in that smooth glance. You did not have to translate it.

"Well, I'm glad they're settled comfortably," Sebastian was saying. "So will my wife be." He turned to Lydia, with an expression of whimsy. True, Sebastian also had charm. Or so, at least, Lydia felt. Her smile was first for him, and secondarily for Gerard.

"How is your health to-day?" Gerard inquired, with his curious air, which was not an accent, of choosing words very carefully. "Are you better?"

Lydia saw Sebastian's brows fly up, first at the friendly tone,

and then at the reference to Lydia's health. She had not mentioned to him her fainting of the previous day.

"I'm not ill," she said, quickly.

"Mrs. Rowe did not seem to be very well when I called yesterday. That was one reason why I called again to-day," explained Gerard, to Sebastian. "The heat, I think, had tried her."

"Yes, she wants a holiday," agreed Sebastian.

"Ah, now why shouldn't she pay a visit to her mother and father? It would be the very thing! I should . . . not be there," he added, slowly. "But she would be very comfortable." He turned to Lydia: "Your father and mother seem to be quite at home."

Lydia bit her lip. He had a wicked eye.

"I say, Lydia; isn't this the *solution?*" crowed Sebastian. "It's an inspiration!"

The artful one! As if she hadn't read the fragment of his letter to Mum! She gave him no attention.

"It's very kind of you, Mr. Gerard," she said, bluntly. "But I shouldn't like to——"

"It would be a great kindness to your mother," he interrupted, in a low tone. "It would help her very much. She has none but French people about her—excepting myself, of course. And your father," he supplemented, with a smile.

But what he was saying to her with his eyes was: I have some news for you. Shall I give it now, before your husband? Or will you not give me some opportunity of speaking with you alone? The smile had been as much a warning to her not to dismiss the topic of her parents as an apology for naming himself before her father as one of the English people near her mother.

But the moment that there was any hint of Ambrose (for it must be of him that Gerard had news to give), Lydia was

paralysed. She could neither bid Gerard speak in front of Sebastian nor think of any pretext by which she could contrive that they should be left alone. Fortunately, Sebastian was so eager to press the subject of a holiday that he hastened on.

"It's the very thing for her, Mr. Gerard. It's what I'd have suggested myself if I'd thought of it. You see, my business doesn't allow me much scope for travelling; but I've always wanted my wife to see a bit of the world. We once planned a trip. It fell through—I forget why. Probably business interfered; or some timidity of mine—— I'm a timid man. I make all sorts of excuses——"

"An honest man," corrected Gerard. "To confess to timidity."

"No," said Sebastian. "Only vain." They laughed. But Sebastian continued: "I've got an idea we went so far as to get our passports. Didn't we, Lydia?"

"They're in the bottom drawer upstairs, under your shirts," Lydia said. Suddenly she was inspired. "How would it be to bring them down?"

"I'll go!" cried Sebastian. He was off like a shot.

"Splendid," breathed Gerard. "Bravo! You are a diplomat, Mrs. Rowe. Now, listen." He had become conspicuously grave. "The boy. I have found out about him. He is ill—in hospital. In the Hampstead Hospital. You could go to see him there. *At any time.* Do you understand?"

"That means he's——" Lydia blanched, and Gerard nodded.

"Very ill. It is meningitis. He may not be conscious. I should go now—at once."

"It's difficult," murmured Lydia. "Yet I must. Of course. D'you mean he's dying?"

"Oh, I can't say that. I didn't suggest . . . But he's very ill."

She stood with her thoughts flying. She did not want to hurt

Sebastian; she did not want to deceive him; she could not bear, just now, another quarrel. And as she tried to think of expedients Gerard spoke again.

"It is your husband who makes it difficult," he said.

Lydia nodded.

"I don't know what to do," she answered, thickly. "I can't think of what to tell him."

How extraordinary that she should be thus upon terms of such intimacy with Gerard! Of course he realised where the difficulty lay. She could not have made that admission to anybody else. But then nobody else would have asked so direct a question! Lydia glanced at him, bewildered.

"The truth is best," said Gerard. "Less harassing. One remembers what one said."

"Stand by me," pleaded Lydia.

"Whatever you say," he answered.

"Got 'em!" called Sebastian, from above. He came running down the stairs brandishing the passports. "How's that, eh? She could start to-morrow!"

"To-day," improved Gerard.

"That's all *you* know," Lydia corrected. "Sebastian, Mr. Gerard has just told me that Ambrose is dying in Hampstead Hospital."

"Dying?" Sebastian flushed suddenly.

"I suggested to Mrs. Rowe that she ought to come with me to see him," added Gerard.

"Of course," said Sebastian. "Dying. Good God!"

"He's not sure." But Lydia was already hastening towards the stairs. As she mounted, she looked down upon the two men. Sebastian, with the passports in his hand was drawn close to Gerard, and was looking up in his face. In just such a position had Ambrose and Sebastian been standing upon that evening when she had come home after the averted accident. It had been her first glimpse of Ambrose. On that night she

had first spoken to Gerard. Now he was standing where Ambrose had stood, and was talking to Sebastian just as Ambrose had done. . . . And Ambrose, in hospital, was dying. She shuddered.

II

The ward was a lofty room of great size, very light. Lydia was quite surprised at its cheerful, even friendly air. One would not be unhappy in such a place, she felt. But she did not like to look at the patients who were lying there, or sitting up in their white-covered beds, in case their feelings should be wounded. She followed the matron with her head a little lowered.

There had been some conversation before this; the matron had asked a few questions about Ambrose; had been frank but not hopeless. Lydia had liked her. She had envied her the coolness and steadiness of manner which arose from great experience of suffering. Now she was noticing the quick, silent steps, the keen glance at the beds, the air of confidence with which the matron walked; and as they came to a stand in the middle of the ward something of her admiration must have been visible, for the matron smiled slightly.

"Over there," she said, pointing to a half-screened bed in the farthest corner of the ward. "Where that screen is. If you want to see me again as you go, you can ask."

She was gone, leaving Lydia to make her way over the polished floor with as little noise as possible.

At the side of the bed another patient sat. He held a sprayer, with which he seemed to be shedding a fine shower of rather sickly-smelling perfume over Ambrose's face. But as Lydia approached the bed she thought Ambrose smiled at her, and her breath caught. Tears sprang to her eyes.

"Hullo," she whispered. "How are you?"

There was no answer. It was like a blow. His face was dis-

torted. This was no smile. His eyes were open, and his lips twitched; but he was unconscious. Lydia bit her lip to keep herself from shedding tears, but she could not take her eyes from that poor face, which now had something of the blue paleness of milk. How thin he was! She had not noticed it so much before. He was painfully emaciated. His hand, which lay out upon the bed, clasped and perfectly still, was bleached and fleshless.

She looked at the man with the sprayer. He was convalescent, but in a hospital jacket. He was absorbed in his task—a youngish, almost boyish-looking fellow with a plump pale face, like the face of a curate, clean-shaven and light-eyelashed. He ignored Lydia. She felt it would be of no use to speak to him, that he would endlessly have continued that fatal, terrible spraying, which so sinisterly emphasised the danger in which Ambrose lay.

Lydia touched the limp white hand. It had no life. For a long time she sat beside the bed; but during that period Ambrose gave no sign of consciousness. Only the piteous twitching of his lips and the hollow stare of those expressionless eyes tore her heart. At last, to the man with the sprayer, she ventured a question:

"Will he wake up?" she asked. He turned and looked at her, without, however, ceasing to spray.

"No," he answered.

"Is it any good my waiting? Can I come back?"

"You must ask Sister," said the young man.

He had averted his head. He did not seem to be aware of Lydia's continued presence. Quickly, furtively, she again touched that pale hand; and at last gently kissed it, holding the hand still in her own for a moment before allowing it to rest once more upon the coverlet. Then she rose, and with her eyes half-closed, tiptoed back across the ward and out to the staircase, and so homewards.

III

Gerard had not waited for her. She had told him not to do so. He had promised to pay a later visit, and to bring the latest news in the morning. And so Lydia arrived home with the heavy mood of sorrow with which she had left the hospital still upon her. She could not forget the terrible shock she had had when her first greeting to Ambrose had been ignored and she had discovered his insensibility. Memory of it haunted her.

Passing up the stairs in silence—for she knew that Sebastian had seen her—she went into the bedroom, and, without attempting to remove her hat and coat, she sat down by the window, staring down at the passers. But she hardly saw them. She was hardly conscious. She was thinking of nothing, but was enduring the memory of that twitching face under the shower of fine spray. Her lips were pressed closely together; her hands lay unclasped in her lap, quite motionless, reddened and roughened by the work she did every day in the house.

He would die. She had no doubt of that. He had been dying when she found him sitting in the Park. The nurse had said he must have been ill for a long time, that he had starved himself. . . . Dying; and she had all along been stupid and cruel to him. Cruel because she had been thoughtless and stupid; stupid and thoughtless because that was her nature. You always saw how wrongly you had acted when it was too late to go back. And then you went on acting wrongly. Not everybody. Lydia. Lydia because she was selfish and a coward. She was ashamed, sitting at the window, looking out at the crowds, but not seeing them.

The lace window curtain blew up into her face; she felt its net against her cheeks, like a heavy veil. She must have left the bedroom door open when she came in, and that was causing a draught. It didn't matter. But then the floor cracked; and Lydia half turned her head, sharply, a little afraid. Sebastian

was in the room, close to her. She saw the uneasiness in his eyes. Something rose in her breast, something against which she fought desperately. It was aversion.

He came closer yet, standing above her as she continued to sit in the chair by the window. His hand was gently laid upon her shoulder. His arm groped its way about her. He was seeking to bring her head to his breast, so that she might lay it there at ease. There was only love and kindness in his manner, and he was making no attempt to caress her. It was in consolation alone that he had come. But to console her for what? For the loss of a friend? Or a lover? He was contrite; he sought by his tenderness not only to allay her pain but to placate her. The fool! That violent feeling which she had been fighting so desperately rose again, again, with such power as to be overwhelming. The pressure upon her arm was unbearable; her cheek revolted from the hot tweed against which he wished it to rest. She was suffocating. She could not keep still. Suddenly:

"No!" cried Lydia, sweeping Sebastian's arm away from her with an uncontrollable movement of nervous repulsion. She rose to her feet, looking at him with horror; saw him flinch. . . . Her quick penitence for having caused pain led her to stumble into apology. "I'm sorry, my dear," she murmured. "I'm a beast——"

"Poor old girl," he said, looking away. His face was tortured. They were both constrained. The noise of the traffic rose dully in the silence of the room.

"No!" repeated Lydia. How *could* he be so stupid as to pity her? "No. No."

She began slowly to take off her coat and hat, moving about the room with a coldness of self-hatred.

PART FOUR

FLOOD

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: A DECLARATION

I

LYDIA was reading a letter from her mother which had come by the second post. It ran:

MY DEAR LYDIA. I expect you will be wanting to know how we are getting along well we are doing fine. It is very strange here and your Dad does not make himself understood as clear as we had hoped he says they do not talk proper french here like in Paris but perhaps it is the fastness or something make it hard to follow when he speaks to them they look all ears but completely dumbfounded. Sometimes I cant help laughing it is so comical. This is a large house dear and there are three maids kept Jennett, Marie, and Roz. we find it very comfortable plenty of cupboards to put things very different to English life your Dad is quite got over his dislike of the french he says human nature the same all the world over and they are like our uncivillised brother. Such tricks as they get up to the maids are nice. Your Dad do very well here he does really and Mr. Gerard is very pleased. He wants me to ask you to come and stay here says it would do you worlds of good and I quite agree with him. There is big gardens here two men kept and chicken a regular farm and it is only half-hour car ride from Calais going fast. Now I must get on with my cooking Mr Gerard must not eat suet pudding he says but one of the maid is showing me in her way what he likes he jabbers away in french and told her to fancy me going to school again at my age I say We we. We are very happy and Dad sends his love says I am to tell you to come he will show you round. You can tell how proud he is quite bossy and getting young again. With love to Sebastian and yourself Your MOTHER.

"Well, *that's* better," said Lydia, beginning at once to reread the laboured writing. "Who's 'He'? Mr. Gerard, I suppose. They all seem bent on getting me out there, don't they!"

That reflection threw her into a brown study. There had been born in her such a longing for some escape from these surroundings of dust and uncertainty, such a curious aspiration for hills and sea and the fluttering of a breeze upon high lands, such as she ordinarily felt at the beginning of Spring, that she was sensitive to every possibility. If she could go away for a little while, and taste the joy of liberty, she would come back again, she thought—to prison!—with a light heart. It was a holiday that she needed; and Sebastian had been right all the time. Yes, he'd been right all the time. Her eyes darkened. Had he? She didn't know so much. At the thought of Sebastian her heart so chilled that she became unhappy and full of shame for a change in herself that she could not fathom. It was not that she had ceased to love him; only that she had lost patience with him. She had discovered that his philosophy was no protection against jealousy; and her respect had suffered an overwhelming blow. She knew him so well that her vanity received no fillip from his jealousy. The caressing love which she had felt was, now that it had been injured, tinged with something approaching contempt. Lydia did not know this. She told herself that the hardness would pass. But unconsciously she was judging Sebastian. The judgment went on all the time, under her other thoughts.

There was a ring; and she saw Gerard step cautiously within the shop, shutting the door behind him with great ceremony, and then standing quite still, with his hands behind his back, as though he were afraid of being tempted to put something in his pocket, or as though he feared contamination from all the displayed riches of the past. China plates, brass gongs, a warming pan, a hundred dingy paintings, busts, a roll of carpet, some dozens of snuff boxes, rings, necklaces, and brooches, made a great array, dim with age, but in some bizarre manner given gloomy lustre by the sunlight. Seeing Gerard in such gingerly state, Lydia felt strangely amused

and expectant. This was the way *she* sometimes felt! Wasn't it funny! Her heart was lightened. For a time her misery was obscured. And when she slipped out towards him, tall, slim, and fair in her blue overall, and facing what there was of light, which played upon her eager face, she saw him glance quickly down the shop, first at herself and then into the darkness from which she emerged, with a satisfaction no less vivid than her own. He set down his hat and came quickly to meet her.

Every movement that Gerard made was quiet and unhesitating. It showed the decisiveness of his mind, which was simple and sure. Even in this he pleased Lydia, used only to Sebastian's long ponderings and vacillations, and to the abrupt, flying irrelevancies of Ambrose. He was hard, reliable, quick. She admired him. She was impressed by him. The trimness of his figure, his excellently-fitting clothes, his suave air of possessing all knowledge, his certainty, were all, to Lydia, satisfying. Of all her longings, the longing for certainty, for definition, was the greatest. That calm, full, olive-coloured face; the beautiful lips; the carriage of his head above those broad shoulders . . . They were immense. They were to be resisted with equal imperiousness, but they were to be respected, admired, even envied. How self-reliant he was! He knew what he wanted; he understood life; he greeted her with quiet considerate amusement—from above, without qualm, without pretence;—and he liked her . . . Great charms, all of them, for one who is struggling against despair!

"You?" said Gerard. "How lucky I am! I had braced myself for a preliminary discussion of antiquity—at a disadvantage. I'm fatally afraid of breaking something when I come in here. Or is it horror I feel? But I suppose there is some fascination in these repulsive things. To me, repulsive. I am afraid of old things, dreary things. I like only the active, and the im-

mortal. You agree? How are you? I think you are better. You are less unhappy?"

Lydia was uneasily conscious that he was talking lightly with the object of establishing some command over her spirit. She knew why that was. He had bad news, and wanted so to charm her that she would be able to bear it as coming from himself. She was not ready to submit to him.

"You've got some bad news," she said at once, turning cold.

Gerard nodded. She saw him bite the inside of his lip in chagrin.

"Yes, some bad news." He was grave again. "I come straight from the Hospital. Nothing could be done. You saw that. He died last night." Gerard turned away his eyes, so that he should not see her pain.

Half-prepared though she had been, Lydia was pierced with horror.

"Dead," she exclaimed, in a low voice. She could say no more. It was over; and she was choking. Ambrose was gone: she would never see him again. She raised her hands to her mouth, pressing them for comfort against quivering lips; and her eyes were closed. A day, and everything was changed. Not so long before, he had been *here,* in this very place, bringing with him the little shepherdess in order that she might keep it in remembrance. She could recollect his voice, his curious restless walk, the thousand glancings of his expression . . .

"For yourself it is very shocking," continued Gerard, in an even voice, still not looking directly at her. "For him, perhaps it's a liberation. He doesn't suffer now."

It was true. It was what they always said; but in this case it was true.

"It doesn't make it any better to *me* to think that," said Lydia, thinking aloud.

"It *will* do so," he replied. For a few moments nothing more was said; but at length Gerard continued: "The father was

there. I didn't see him. They said he had arrived a few minutes before I did." He shrugged his shoulders. "They had sent for him overnight, it seems. He had taken his night's rest."

"Shameful old man," muttered Lydia.

"I was asked about . . . the funeral. I said I would tell you."

Lydia shook her head.

"Oh, no!" she cried out, in pain.

"I said I thought not."

"I don't want to go. It's horrid of me. But I was fond of him," she said slowly. She felt half-dead herself. Why did such bitter things happen? She would never see him again. "In a sort of way," Lydia added, half to herself. Then: "I suppose I shall forget that."

"Mercifully. One forgets. You shall hear how I—— But first, there isn't anything more I can do for you there?"

"You've been very good," answered Lydia, mechanically. But she was thinking: I shall forget all about Ambrose. I was only sorry for him. It was that. It wasn't anything else. I'm shocked—not heart-broken. But I can't get him out of my mind now. She shuddered at the memory of Ambrose as she had last seen him, lying in bed under the softly hissing shower of pungent water. So clear was that memory that she swayed momentarily in horror. In a crying tone, she said: "I thought he was smiling at me. I'll never forget *that!*" Her breath caught. She turned aside, her arms rigid. "And he'd been so unhappy." She shuddered again at the recollection of that tortured face.

"Yes; he had been unhappy. One could tell that. And you, too, had been unhappy," answered Gerard. "For those who feel, unhappiness is so constant that a moment's happiness is incredible joy. I shall tell you something that I have always wanted to tell you. Two years ago I was extremely unhappy. I thought I should never again know what happiness was. My

wife was killed in front of me. I can't forget it, even now. We were in Paris. I had been out, and was returning home, walking along the rue de la Boëtie, when I saw my wife on the other side of the street. She had seen me an instant before. She ran heedlessly towards me. In all that rapid traffic! I shouted and ran into the street; but it was too late. She was knocked down and killed before my eyes. We had been married only three years, and were very happy. Since then I have been quite morbid about such things. I envisage accidents everywhere. I have the feeling that everything I love will be lost to me in the same way. It is an obsession." He closed his eyes as he spoke. Then he added: "You can imagine my feeling when I saw *you* nearly sacrificed in the same way——"

As he said the last words he was smiling faintly at Lydia—archly, as it seemed. But his tone at first had been tragic.

Lydia's thoughts of Ambrose had been arrested—it had been Gerard's object to arrest them—and she listened intently to what he said. His wife! She had never thought of him—— That word quickened her interest in Gerard.

"In Paris," she said. But she was thinking: "His wife . . . He has had a wife. . . . What was she like?"

"My wife was a Frenchwoman. It was because of that I went to live permanently in France. I am half-French myself."

"I guessed that," said Lydia, quickly. "The way you speak."

He smiled again.

"I think you guess a great many things," he told her. "And always correctly. Though very few about yourself."

"Myself?" she asked, rather wonderingly. Her attention was completely distracted; although she continued to suffer pain because of her late shock. And yet she was not very much absorbed in what he would say. "I don't know what you mean."

"No," said Gerard. "I didn't think you would know that." He had a very soft voice, very pleasant in tone, and rather

deep. Lydia liked to see those finely-cut lips as they pronounced the words which came so distinctly to her ears. She wished him to continue speaking; and with an effort recollected what it was he had said earlier. Herself! He had been speaking of *her!* He had said——

"Well, I should *like* to know," she asserted, the more eagerly because what she said was only half-true. "I'm interested in myself."

"It's a part of your attractiveness that you're *not* interested in yourself. You don't understand that? No. I shall tell you. It makes you unlike a good many of the woman one meets." He raised his brows interrogatively at her disapproving expression of doubt. "Well, then, you're unlike most of your sex because you are not sophisticated."

"Aren't I?" asked Lydia. "What *is* sophisticated?" At his shrug and smile, she persisted: "I read about it in papers. Sometimes they say it's good, and sometimes not so good. I can't make it out. It seems as if it meant that you'd just found out how babies come, and couldn't get over it. And your nerves being tired, of course."

"That would be one definition," agreed Gerard. "It isn't quite what I meant."

"It seems to me that sophisticated people think they're too clever for anything, when they're only run down," continued Lydia, thoughtfully. "And it wouldn't be any good for me to think that. I'm not the kind. Besides, there isn't anybody for me to show off to. Sebastian knows me too well."

"There is myself?" suggested Gerard. "But then perhaps you would not count me as a person?"

"Oh, no!" cried Lydia. "I know it wouldn't be any good with you." The mere thought of such a thing made her warm. She added: "Besides, you get out of the way of it unless you're always in little herds. I never go anywhere."

"You are invited to France," smiled Gerard. "Don't forget that!"

"I shall be *packed off* to France, you mean," retorted Lydia. She sighed, thinking of Sebastian. And, passing from Sebastian, of Ambrose. Her head throbbed. Poor Ambrose! He was dead. He was *dead*, and she could not realise it. Nor could Gerard, who had never known him. Gerard knew nothing of Ambrose. But he had been kind. He had helped her. She must show that she appreciated that help. But how? Oh, by a formal word. She would thank him. She did so: "You've been very good to my mother and father." Gerard bowed, without speaking. Inquisitively, but without paying heed to her own words, Lydia went on: "Why did you do it? I've always wondered."

"Good?" asked Gerard. "I don't . . . quite . . ." There was a quizzical, slightly puzzled expression upon his face. "I consider myself very fortunate. No? If I were to tell you I think you might be angry, and I don't want you to be angry. Well, then, I've always wanted English people about me. Is it possible that you don't appreciate your father's ability?"

"I've never noticed that he had any," answered Lydia, bluntly.

"You're unjust to him. He has considerable ability. He has great integrity. So has your mother."

"Yes, but . . . integrity . . . and *cooking*." Lydia was thinking aloud.

"Your mother had no interest in cooking. She had no interest in life. She now has both. She has an interest in *me*. Is that so strange? Your father has an interest in living, also. He has responsibility. It suits him. You will be surprised when you see them both. But they're doing exactly what I want."

Lydia continued to look incredulous.

"All I can say is, that you've got a marvellous quick eye," she cried, stubbornly.

"You have a relationship feeling towards them. You know

them, you are related to them; *therefore* they're no good. That's it, isn't it? It is very English. The English run themselves down, and despise their friends and relations . . . It is a sort of arrogance. They don't care to let anybody else do it for them. Isn't *that* arrogance? I don't know *what* it is. But I assure you I'm very well satisfied."

If Gerard was satisfied, Lydia was not. Her face must have shown as much, for Gerard, laughing quietly, put his hand quickly forward, as if to touch her elbow. He must have seen that she drew instinctively away.

"Come," he said. "You don't believe me. What I say is true. It's not the whole truth, of course. The truth is that I wanted to help *you*. I wanted to know you. I was much tempted that night at the restaurant to follow you and your husband home. But I didn't care to. Then—you must know that I have a flat at Hampstead, and when I am in London I get great pleasure from walking and loafing in the streets—I saw you, quite by accident, going into a doorway in Hornsey Road. It seemed a miracle. Could it be that you lived there? I waited. In half an hour, I saw you come out again. So you *didn't* live there! I followed. You seemed to be very much excited, and, as I followed you, you suddenly turned and plunged into me. It might have been an opportunity, but you were not conscious of me, and turned into another street. Again I followed—forgive me! The temptation was not to be resisted. To my horror, I was afraid the accident to my wife was going to be repeated——"

"It wasn't," interjected Lydia.

"Those with fixed ideas—and all women suffer from fixed ideas, which is their tragedy—don't look where they are going. Come, that's a saying that means more than one realises! Don't you think so?"

"Carry on," said Lydia, who preferred her own generalisations.

"You don't think so. I guessed as much. You were harsh, and suspicious of me——"

"I wasn't," corrected Lydia. "But I don't talk to strange men in the street. It's a nasty habit. So you followed me again?"

She saw that he was checked by her accusation, and that he was referring it to his memory.

"I followed you again. My first thought was that I might come and buy something here. But I have such detestation of . . . all this . . ." He waved a slow hand upon the level of his shoulder at the welter of curios by which they were surrounded. "In fact I knew that I should make a muddle of it, and never dare to come again. One of my avenues to you would be stopped. I chose another way."

"Ah, now I see," said Lydia, growing cold all over. She shrank from him, her eyes stern.

"You are angry. Without cause. Yes, I assure you, without cause. *Believe* me!" His tone was urgent.

"I don't know so much," she persisted. "I don't like it. You talk as if it was the most natural thing. I'd like to know what you expected to get out of it."

Gerard shrugged. He looked at her in a strange way. But he did not hesitate.

"When one is in love," he said, coolly, "does one expect anything? That is not my experience. One obeys an impulse that one can't resist."

II

Love? Lydia started. He was laughing at her. She stared, although her heart raced. What was he talking about? Love?

"I don't know what you mean!" she cried.

He loved her. It was absurd. Two months earlier it would have seemed to Lydia outrageous. Not so now. She had changed. The chill suspicion of a moment earlier gave place to astonishment, incredulity, something that she could not

analyse. It was triumph; it was fear. What was he thinking? He loved her. Such a strange exultation filled Lydia that she was amazed at herself. But Gerard seemed to remain as coolly confident as ever. No colour showed in his cheeks; his gaze was steady; he had nerves of steel.

"You are surprised," he said, in a moment. "That surprises you, then."

"Yes," agreed Lydia, marvelling at the dryness of her tone. "I'm surprised, all right. Did you think I shouldn't be?"

"But you're not angry?"

No, she was not angry.

"Yes, I am," said Lydia. "I'm shocked, too."

Gerard said:

"It is strange that you should be shocked."

Even then, Lydia was apprehensive that he would approach her, take her hand, hold her so that she should not escape. Her breath came quickly. She braced herself. A flush rose hotly to her cheeks. She must resist him, although she was in secret consternation. Steel must be answered with steel.

"Not so awfully strange," she countered, looking straight at Gerard.

"You disappoint me," he said slowly.

That was a blow to Lydia: she flinched. She did not want to disappoint him. But her experience in men was not great enough for effective manœuvre. She shook her head.

"I was just beginning to like you; and now——"

"Too bad of me! I'm impetuous. You must forget what I said."

He was cold. Lydia was terrified.

"What about *me* being disappointed?" she asked, with some agitation. "You don't seem to think of that!"

Gerard moved towards her. With a vehement effort she restrained herself from stepping backwards. If she had yielded an inch, he must have followed her.

"We'll talk of something else," he said. "The weather, France, your husband—even this Barmecide's feast of riches—" he again derisively indicated the stock of antiques with which the shop was crowded. "You live here in a mouldering cave. It is a mausoleum of hope. To my mind it is unthinkable that *you* should exist in such surroundings."

"I think you're bad!" Lydia said, abruptly.

Gerard was taken aback. Or he pretended to be taken aback. She could not be sure. She could be sure of nothing but her own weakness.

"Oh, come!" he protested. "No man is altogether bad. That's unworthy of you!"

"You're not being sincere."

"I can't be. I *could* be. When I try to be at ease with you, I'm not sincere. I am not at ease with you, because I love you. With another woman, yes——"

"If you were in love with me," Lydia said, "you wouldn't talk about men and women."

"Why not? There is no *rule* in such things," he objected, very seriously. "You can't expect me to stammer like a yokel. Besides, there is a . . . As long as I am uncertain of *your* feeling, I must—you realise—put some check on my emotion."

Trembling, Lydia slowly nodded her head.

"Yes, I believe that," she agreed.

"And I am *not* used to making love in a shop."

"Nor to married women?" she asked, misunderstanding him.

"Who's talking about men and women *now?*" demanded Gerard. "Isn't it you?"

Lydia was for an instant speechless under this attack. Then she said quickly:

"But then I'm not in love with you, you see."

He was perhaps paler than he had been. Otherwise he gave no sign of being wounded.

"That's a point," he acknowledged. "We shall have to talk about something else after all, shan't we? Your holiday, for example!"

"Oh, that's no good now," Lydia said, roughly. "I'm not going. I never was keen on it."

Gerard smiled. She could see that maddening relaxation of his features, an air of indulgence, a softening of the lines about his mouth.

"You are very harsh to me," he remonstrated. "It's not just or merciful. What have I done to deserve such harshness?"

"You've made me uncomfortable," answered Lydia. "With your nonsense." She moved her head. She was afraid to do more. "That's what you've done. Made me lose my temper, too."

"Splendid!" cried Gerard. She had never seen him so animated. His broad shoulders were squared. She saw anew the curious shape of his head, and was fascinated by it. And as he had exclaimed, "Splendid!" she was taken aback, because her feeling of powerlessness against him was thereby heightened. "Splendid!" repeated Gerard, turning upon her with suave triumph. "Then you're not indifferent to me."

It was true. There was something—a charm, a bafflingness, the association which had sprung up between them, a hostility, an inclination to measure strength. She was not indifferent to him. She could only deny it.

"I *am!*" she said stoutly.

"Prove it. Tell me to go away at once, and not to come back again. If you tell me to go, I shall go. If you tell me not to come back, I shall never come back. Now!"

Lydia knew that he would do as he promised. What colossal vanity! He'd die rather than show weakness. He wouldn't plead. He expected her to beg. She confronted him. Her head was up.

"You know I can't do that," she said. "There's my mother and father to think of."

Gerard laughed.

"You think very quickly," he answered. "I've noticed it before. Put them out of your head. This is between you and me."

"Well, then, you can go," cried Lydia, hotly.

Gerard took up his hat. He was perfectly resolute.

"Good-bye," he said, holding out his hand.

Lydia put both her hands behind her back.

III

She could not have said why she did it. Gerard pretended that he knew, and flicked his hand triumphantly through the air; but he was watching her without trying to conceal a wary reading of her uncertain mood. Yes, but if she gave him her hand he would never release it. She had had this sense all along, from their first meeting. He was one of those who took all he could get; and Lydia was afraid of him, because he attracted her so much.

"Not what you think," she said.

Their eyes met darkly, with defiance upon her side, and calmness—however forced—upon his.

"I think nothing," responded Gerard.

"You think I'm easy," Lydia cried. "That's where you're wrong."

"If I had thought you were easy——" began Gerard. There was a strained note in his voice for the first time. Lydia caught it; she was like lightning.

"You've always done it," she said, in bitter rebellion. "Always. All the time. From the beginning. D'you think I couldn't see? The way you've talked to me——"

"How surprised you are!" suddenly exclaimed Gerard. "But mind, I respect you for that!"

Lydia was bewildered. What did he mean? Was he sneering at her? Her heart was now beating very fast. It seemed to be throbbing in her throat.

"I said you were *not* surprised. I was wrong," continued Gerard. "Forgive me. Is it really true that you never thought of me in that way?"

"I never did," answered Lydia. "How could I?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Extraordinary woman! You're actually surprised! That's because you're not always expecting men to fall in love with you. How old-fashioned you are! Not a modern woman at all!"

"Oh, dear," groaned Lydia. "We're back again at men and women!"

Gerard gave a little exasperated laugh. But it was admiring, too.

"You are a devil!" he exclaimed. "Did you know that?"

He was quite close to Lydia, and facing her. Lydia, with her breath coming quickly, shrank, but did not retreat. She held her hands behind her, so that he should not take them. She was so much occupied with watching his movements that she did not realise how rapidly her breast rose and fell, and how Gerard, seeing this, must be more aware of her agitation than she wished him to be.

"—Or not a devil," murmured Gerard. His expression changed. The glitter of excitement died from his eyes. They became soft and dark as night—with pity. His lips parted, smiling. "No, not a devil. My dear, I wish you could know how much I love and admire you. If you could *believe*. Lydia——"

It was the first time that he had spoken her name. It

seemed to be the first time that she had ever heard the name spoken. His tone was full of caress. Lydia started. Her hands came from behind her. She took a step backwards. And as she did so Gerard's arms were about her body.

Both were silent. As Lydia struggled away, those relentless arms held her tight. She felt his thigh against her own, her hand fiercely pushing against his shoulder, saw his face coming nearer and nearer to her own, until the warm breath from his lips fanned her cheek.

"You . . . forget . . ." panted Lydia. "You're not . . . used to making . . . love in . . . a shop." With a great effort she wrenched her hand free; and, held only by one wrist, pulled away from him as far as strength could carry her. Her cheeks were red and white by turns; her mouth was open; her hair ruffled. In the struggle Gerard, too, had reddened. She could see the colour under that dusky skin, and his eyes shining. But he still appeared to be cool; a smile was upon his lips.

"What d'you mean?" whispered Gerard. "What d'you *mean*?" He, too, was breathing rapidly.

"What you said . . . That I'm . . . I'm a shopkeeper!" cried Lydia. "And you're a——"

"O-o-h!" It was a long-drawn cry of protest. "My dear child! Lydia! What rot! I meant the openness of the scene. The other—how *could* you!"

He was looking at her with reproach.

"I thought you meant——"

"Come to me!"

"No!"

With a dexterous movement, he had pulled her to his side. His arms were close about her. Lydia could struggle no longer; for the more she struggled, the closer, inevitably, he must embrace her. So she ceased to struggle, although she opposed to his desire a rigidity of body which gave him no power over her.

"No," said Gerard, softly in her ear. "Not against your will, my beautiful."

He slowly released her, and when Lydia was standing free, at a yard's distance from him, he held out his hands appealingly. But Lydia shook her head. She was exhausted.

"I think you'd better go now," she said, unsteadily. "I'm not angry; but I . . ."

"You're ill?" he asked. Lydia shook her head. "I've hurt you? How idiotic of me!" Again the shaken head. "You *wish* me to go? Sincerely? I think you do. Then I shall go. But may I come again? To-morrow?"

"I expect you'll come again," Lydia said, "whatever I say."

"I shall. But when?"

"Oh, not for days! Not for a long time!" cried Lydia.

"You fill me with hope," Gerard answered. Taking up his hat, he bowed with gaiety, turned, glanced back, took an uncontrollable step, checked himself, and so left her.

The moment he had gone, Lydia was overwhelmed with a desire that he should stay; but it was too late. She ran to the door. He had gone. It was characteristic. She had no power over him. That made her thoughtful. He would always be a stranger to her, and he would always be beyond her control. She must either hate him or love him. Why, her wrist was quite red where he had gripped it so hard. Presently it would be bruised. She looked at the wrist, and raised it until its hot skin was pressed to her cooler cheek. Her heart was not beating so fiercely now. It was almost steady. But something was different. A fire had been kindled within.

In repassing the table by which Gerard had been standing, Lydia caught sight of a visiting card. It was Gerard's. He had written upon it, in pencil, his address in Hampstead. Somehow, following as it did upon the violent temptation of a few moments before, and upon Gerard's going, the sight of the card caused her to fall into fresh agitation. Why had he left

it? She now knew where he lived . . . if she wanted him . . . He had known as much. Oh, he was *wicked!* She didn't trust him. Who could trust him? She stood thinking for several minutes, with the card in her hand; and at length placed it in the pocket of her overall.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: MADNESS

I

All was silent in the house. Upstairs Mrs. Way slept like a tortoise. Nothing ever disturbed her. She was now impervious to shock. Under the scraggy flesh that formed her outer covering her nervous system was as tough as one of those wire foundations upon which wreaths are built. Lydia tossed in secret. She knew that Sebastian was awake; but he did not speak. The outline of his head upon the pillow could be faintly seen in the darkness. It was nearly morning. In an hour, this room, now dingy in the first faint greyness that precedes the dawn, would be alight. Another day, as troubled as the night had been, would begin; while before her stretched a lifetime of days. Restlessness would never end but in death.

"If only I could *sleep*," moaned Lydia to herself. "Or die."

She slept at last, for a short time. At her awaking the greyness had whitened. Day was at hand. As she looked again towards Sebastian it seemed that he, too, at last was sleeping heavily; and that belief gave her an interval of freedom. She stretched her hot body in search of tranquillising coolness, yawning heavily.

It was three days since her conversation with Gerard; and excitement, instead of passing, had increased. She no longer had any recollection of Ambrose: he had faded in her mind as a human being, and was presently only as she had last seen him. He was dead, and the agitation which, living, he had caused, no longer disturbed her peace. That was because another, stronger, force had begun to rear threateningly upon her.

"Gerard!" Lydia was exhausted. She now longed for daylight.

Gradually the morning noises began to be heard. The rattling of a milk-barrow over the setts rose high in the air, and the hum of a motor-car. In a few minutes—before she

could realise what was happening,—there would be a steady roar of traffic. It would then be time to rise, and to continue her fruitless life.

"You'd think there was nothing in it," thought Lydia, heavily. "Well, what *is* there?"

She wouldn't go to France. If she went, he'd find some means of being there at the same time. He'd be always there—now. No escaping him—now. Her cheeks were hot at the thought. No escape. It was strange how all speculations narrowed down and narrowed down; until she struggled against something that allured her even while it frightened her. No escape.

What did she want? She wanted peace, contentment, tranquillity. In vain.

"I want everything at once," thought Lydia. "I'm greedy."

She lay thereafter in a waking stupor, until it was time to get up. Her eyes burned; they felt swollen. She let her features relax, giving herself up, as it were, to nothingness; and imagined that she must look like an idiot. That was how idiots looked—all vacant. Who could tell what went on behind that air of vacancy? Perhaps little idiotic runnels of consciousness such as she herself felt in a void of silence.

It was quite light now. Her limbs were weary. They ached. So did her head, from overmuch puzzling. If only something would happen!

"Gerard."

How stupid it was to lie here, imagining all sorts of things. Imagining herself in Gerald's arms. Lydia flushed. She could feel the blood creeping all over her body.

Was this love?

No, no; it was Sebastian that she loved. Sebastian was her husband. Lydia's head fell to one side, hopelessly. What feebleness to tell herself a thing like that! She was growing silly. And it was broad daylight. She must go down those dusty stairs, and into the dark basement. That was where she lived. It was

where she belonged—a home as obscure and melancholy as herself. But she had not always been melancholy. It was Sebastian's fault that she was so discontented. No, it was her own.

Sighing impatiently at the self-contradiction, Lydia pushed back the bed clothes and left her bed. Why, the very rug beside the bed was hot; it was not until her feet touched the linoleum that they received a chill, for the sun was not yet high enough to warm the room, and the clammy coldness of that floor-covering was at its height. A moment later the curtains bellied. She had opened the door, and was running the gauntlet of those spectral antiques which were her daily horror.

II

By eight o'clock the breakfast was laid. The coffee smelled good; and Sebastian's one boiled egg sat under its knitted cap with a red tassel. She could hear Sebastian himself shuffling down the stairs. How slowly he came now! Like an old man. He *was* an old man. He had aged much in the last few weeks; and although, when he had a customer, he threw off his lassitude and assumed the peering, shrewd, whimsical air of the specialist, Lydia knew that when he was alone, and his face was sunk in repose, he looked sad and fatigued with age.

"My fault!" said her conscience, at the shuffle. "It's me that's making him old!"

She did not look up as he entered, but occupied herself with her picture newspaper, which was filled this morning with people receiving prizes, people shaking hands, people waving good-byes from a liner, merry girls in linked rows and bathing costumes, smiling at the photographer, and dogs with pipes in their mouths and hats on their heads.

"One for you," murmured Sebastian, passing with a handful of letters and sale catalogues, and putting one small narrow envelope beside her plate. He did not seem to notice her; if

he was curious about the letter he gave no sign of his curiosity.

Lydia glanced down at the envelope. It was a business communication. Not from her mother, not from her sister at the other end of the world. Gerard? She could not believe that this spiky, clerk-like writing was his. The postmark was full of long lines. London. The back of the envelope was plain.

"That's odd," said Lydia, weighing the letter in her fingers.

"Open it," advised Sebastian. So he *was* curious! He must have been watching her. He was always doing that now, with stealth and timidity. Lydia sometimes imagined a faint tic or nervous movement of the head, as if his heart shook his whole body.

She did as she had been told to do; and found within the envelope a stiff sheet of paper, which crackled as she spread it out. Unknown names headed the paper; the signature was illegible; the typewriting was smeared as the result of old-fashioned copying with sodden damp-sheets. But the letter could be read. It was very brief. It said:

DEAR MADAM:

The late Mr. Ambrose Thayer.

Before his death the above executed a will in which he left all his property absolutely and unconditionally to yourself. We shall be glad if you will favour us with a call at your convenience in respect of same

Yours faithfully

BYNG AND HOWLEY.

The late Mr. Ambrose Thayer. . . . They meant Ambrose! Absolutely and unconditionally . . . favour us with a call. Lydia read the letter in a state of stupefaction. No delight moved her. She was neither shocked nor cheered. She was bewildered. And as soon as she had finished reading it once, uncomprehendingly, she began to read it a second time. What did these people mean? The boy had not had any money.

What had he said to her one day? Still bewildered, and unaware of Sebastian's concern, she folded up the letter and put it back into its envelope, holding it then between her finger and thumb while she stared before her.

She didn't want his money. Why had he left it to her? Why had he made such a will? Had he been meaning all the time, as she had feared, to take his own life?

" 'We shall be glad if you will . . . Absolutely and unconditionally.' " What was it they said? She opened the letter again and read it for a third and a fourth time. Could she refuse it? That poor, silly boy, to give it to her! Had he nothing better to do with it?

Two hundred pounds a year, he had said. Why, she could live on that. She would be independent. She could buy clothes with it, and look nice. Or rent a cottage in the country. Or go abroad . . . to see Mum and Dad. Farther than that: she could go to America . . . She could buy, she could do, she could give . . . Sebastian would be able to retire sooner. It would lighten all his loads.

How late that thought had come in her speculations! Sebastian!

He would have to know about it. What would he say? Flinching, Lydia straightened out the letter, and, without speaking, passed it across the table to Sebastian. He pretended, at first, not to see it, but to be busy with his own post, tearing off wrappers and straightening catalogues; so that she had to draw his attention to the letter as it lay, ignored, beside the marmalade.

"Here's some funny news," she said in a dull voice. "Look at that!"

III

Sebastian, still pretending, glanced at her over the top of his spectacles, assumed an air of unconcern, as if he supposed that

this was some trifling matter, unworthy of his attention, and finally followed her pointing finger. At first he tried to read the letter without touching it; but his curiosity was too great. His hand stole trembling out towards the deeply-folded sheet of paper. He put down the catalogue he had been holding. There was a long silence, while Lydia allowed her mind to fall into the momentary coma of stupefaction for which her lack of sleep during the night was responsible.

She awoke to find Sebastian staring at the letter, his face crimson. His lips were quivering. He was vehemently excited. But when he spoke his voice, although breathless, was as nearly casual as he could make it.

"Hm. Bit queer, eh?" he said.

"I wish he hadn't," Lydia answered.

"Didn't you know about it, then?"

For an instant, Lydia did not understand the question.

"What? Oh, no. How could I have known?" she asked, innocently.

Sebastian smiled; his lips were drawn back from his teeth. He said nothing.

"I remember he said once that he'd got some money of his own," volunteered Lydia. "But why he should——"

"Oh, that's clear enough," Sebastian said, jerkily. He fidgetted with his spectacles; then with the papers and catalogues before him. "I should have thought *that* would be clear enough to anybody."

Lydia thought wearily: "Oh, he's begun again! Oh, dear, why does he *do* it. It's so *silly!*" Aloud, she said: "Well, when you're five or six and twenty you don't generally make wills if you think you're going to want the money yourself. Do you?"

That made Sebastian ponder. An expression of doubt settled upon his face. The colour, which had been leaving his cheeks, came again.

"No," he said, thoughtfully. "That's true. That's true. What did he do it for?"

"Didn't want his father to have it, I suppose," suggested Lydia.

"Hm," grunted Sebastian. He did not look at her. "That boy was mad about you."

"Yes," admitted Lydia. What was the good of denying it? She saw him flush again.

"You were, about him, too," muttered Sebastian, clearing his throat. The words had been almost inaudible, so hoarse had he grown.

"Never," said Lydia, in a resigned tone.

"I say you *were*," insisted Sebastian, very quietly.

Trembling, Lydia looked directly at him. Her temper had risen like a sudden tempest.

"I know you've thought that," she answered. "Well, you've shown it. And why you should get jealous of a boy like that, I don't know. It's so stupid of you. It's so *stupid!*" She caught up the discarded envelope, and looked unseeingly at it. She could not read the writing. She felt that she was being torn a thousand ways.

"Jealous!" Sebastian cried, in a furious voice. Mastering himself, he added: "Well, I suppose it's true. Yes, it's true. Yes, I admit it. And this——" He flicked the letter with his finger; and, as he did this, rose to his feet. "The fact is, I can't sit still. Lydia, I've tried to be reasonable. I think I *am* reasonable. But you'll admit that this letter . . . I mean, here's this boy leaving his money—— Are you going to tell me there never was anything between you?"

"What chance was there?" demanded Lydia. "Even if I'd wanted. Which I never did."

"Hoh! There were plenty of chances! How am I to know how many times Mother Way was used to mind the shop!"

Lydia stared at him. A chill spread through her body.

"You can ask her," she said, deliberately.

"D'you think I'd do that!" exclaimed Sebastian, with a piercing glance. "Why, I wouldn't dream of it!"

"No, you'd rather drive yourself dotty with suspicion!" cried Lydia. "That's what *you'd* rather do!" She sprang up from the table. "Making yourself ill, making *me* feel like a murderer! How d'you think I like it?"

"You?" Sebastian said. "At any rate you like it better than I do; for I'm damned if I find my life worth living just at present."

Again that movement of the head, like a tic. Lydia saw it. She was alarmed by it, and warned. She must control herself, or she would kill him.

"It's making you ill," she said, quickly. "We mustn't talk like this." But Sebastian smiled bitterly at the words, and his smile excited her to protest. "And there's nothing in it at all," she exclaimed. "Nothing whatever. How can I *make* you believe it? That's what I want to know. I've told you I was fond of him, as I might have been fond of a baby—— Nothing else. I didn't want his money. I didn't want *anything* from him . . ."

She became silent, ashamed of having heard the sound of her own voice. There was a long pause, while she confronted him, and Sebastian, biting his lip, refused to meet her eyes.

"Well, I'll try and believe it," was what he said, at last.

Lydia started.

"How's that?" she exclaimed. "Try? Why should you have to try, when it's true? I'm ashamed of you!"

"Oh, you've always been that," answered Sebastian, with heat. "As long as I can remember. It's nothing new. Good God! What a history it is! Here I've given you everything I could—my money, my thoughts, my care, everything I could do to make you happy. Six years of it. Not all lavender for me, you know. Work all day, and every day . . . Worrying

day in, day out, for *you*. For *your* future, and *your* present. Thinking how to give you a good time, and leave you with a little money to live on when I'm gone. That on top of the business. As if I hadn't enough . . . But that's a thing you've never cared about. Never. You've taken it for granted. Simply because I've never made a song . . . But what *I'm* supposed to get out of it, with all this——"

His voice died. Lydia listened, stupefied, to that tone of outraged patience, of self-pity, of long-hidden accusation. She was filled with horror. He was talking crazily. Did he really believe that she had had "a good time," that he had done all the worrying, that she'd been ungrateful, that *she* had done nothing? Good heavens! The injustice made her sick with trouble. She had never been so unhappy. She had always thought she had helped him. She had thought she had been contented with very little. She had thought—and it wasn't true. She *hadn't* helped . . . Oh, it was horrible!

"You talk as if I'd only been a nuisance to you," she accused, half-crying. "Is that what you think? Have I only been a worry all this time? If so, I'm a pretty useless creature! You'd be better off without me."

Those impetuous words alarmed Sebastian. He tried to interrupt her.

"No, no, no!" he cried. But she would finish her protest.

"I haven't known. I've thought I was helping. I've thought I didn't ask for much. It seems I'm worse than nothing at all."

"No, you're not!" exclaimed Sebastian. "God knows, you're the best——" He was shaking violently from head to foot. "Look here, we're both——"

"That's what you've just said!" cried Lydia. "About how *you* bear everything, and how *I* take it for granted."

"Oh, God damn it all!" fumed Sebastian. "How tired I am of all this! I'm tired to death of it!" He was shouting.

"You started it," Lydia answered. "About the letter!"

"Blast the letter!" He shuffled to the door. "I'm sick of *that*, too. I wish the young fool had never come here."

Lydia, still panting and half-sobbing with excitement, heard the flapping of his shoes upon the stairs as he mounted. Slap, slap, slap . . . Then the squeaking of the door-handle at the head of the stairs, and the slamming of the door. Lower and lower sank her head, now that the tension had ceased. She did not cry, but she felt such despair as she had never previously known.

IV

She could not forget those accusing words. Had she always been as selfish as he had said? Had she accepted everything he had done, without supposing that there was any need to play her part, and take her share of the worries? Hadn't she sometimes worried herself almost ill? But Sebastian didn't think so. Was he right? Her mind refused to leave the doubt. All the time she was doing her work, she was goading herself with memories of those long-stifled words of Sebastian's, forced from hiding by his mood of torment. She had done nothing to help . . . she had taken all the time, giving nothing . . . Was it true? Was it true? She *must* know. Anger had gone; but despair haunted her.

"I'm no good," she said, once.

She had answered Sebastian: "Then I'm a pretty useless creature. You'd be better off without me." Those words also recurred. What else had she said? She could not remember. She remembered only what Sebastian had said. He was jealous. He didn't mean what he said. Yes, but there was something else there: it wasn't only jealousy. Something he had hidden for years. Such things came out in quarrels; but they were there all the time. Hatreds, even. She had been too quiet. She hadn't made fusses. It wasn't her nature to make fusses. He had thought she didn't notice . . . didn't *mind*. When it had

been his goodness to her that had made her love him as she had done. Nothing else. He had been good, and she had been grateful. That was how it had begun; that was how it had gone on. Nothing else. But she had loved him. She still loved him in the same way. He didn't believe it.

And now there was this other feeling. It was so strong. She had wanted to yield herself to Gerard. It was as if some hot vapour had clouded her mind. Her throat had been dry. She had known that she must resist him with all her strength. Ever since, she had dreamed that she was in his arms.

Sebastian didn't want her.

Without knowing what she was doing, Lydia continued her morning's work. She washed the breakfast dishes; she put everything away; she sat, with her head aching, trying to remember what it was that she had meant to add to her shopping list. These things were her routine. Whatever the circumstances, they could not be neglected. Gerard wanted her; Sebastian did not. Had it been bread or cornflower or matches that she had been going to buy? Not bread, not matches. . . . Sebastian didn't want her: she was no good to him. Only a drag. He worried about everything. . . . That was true. He did. He wouldn't share some of his worries. He wouldn't share *those;* but he made it a grievance, as well as a nobility. That wasn't fair of him. She was like that herself. You thought yourself fine for keeping a trouble secret; but you almost hated the one you spared, for not seeing how fine you were! Why, it was ten o'clock. She must do her shopping. She must try and recollect what it was she had wanted to get. Was it something for Gerard? Of course not! Why did she think of him? Something . . .

Many minutes passed, while Lydia dreamed. Suddenly the boots of a rough-shod passer scrambled loudly across the grating in the pavement. What on earth was she thinking of? Lydia jumped up from the chair upon which she had been

sitting. Here it was nearly half-past ten, and she had done no shopping. Gerard, Gerard, Gerard—she was impatient with herself. What had Gerard to do with all this?

"I'm mad!" she said aloud.

As she went through the shop on her way to the bedroom, Lydia felt her throat throbbing. She was weak. She did not dare to glance towards Sebastian's desk. He might look up, might start again. She dreaded that more than anything else in the world. If only she could escape him!

It was bad for Sebastian to have these scenes. It must hurt his heart, by putting too great a strain upon it. He would be ill. She must not let him be ill. She must not give any opportunity for any more quarrels. He wasn't strong enough for them. And they killed her. But she had been forced to show him the letter. Living as they did, with everything coming to her through Sebastian, she could not have hidden it. He *must* know about such a thing as that. Besides, there were few things that she did not tell him. He ought to have been pleased at a bit of luck. But he grudged anything that came to her unless it was from himself. He wanted to do everything. Then he could tell himself he did everything and have a grievance against her.

In the bedroom Lydia caught sight of her face in the mirror. It was swollen. The lips were swollen. Her eyes looked full and heavy. They glowed; there was something peculiar in them.

"Oh, what's the matter with me!" groaned Lydia. "I look awful!"

The eyes, answering her from the heart of the mirror, were full of suppressed excitement. They seemed to hint, to be expectant. They arrested her. They tempted her. What did they say?"

"If only I could get away!"

Escape! The eyes shone. They mocked. Then they grew tragic. No escape! Never any escape, unless—— Unless——

The eyes looked back at her, startled. They were stricken with horror. But as Lydia searched them they became secret; they veiled themselves; they were lost to her—a fringe of eyelashes in the redness which crept steadily into her cheeks, higher and higher, until they flamed scarlet. At the same time her heart was beating to suffocation; her breast rose and fell; her lips parted.

V

How she lived through the day, Lydia never knew. But she endured. Her brain was confused; her limbs were weak; she could not keep still. Sebastian stayed at his desk until long after she had called him for lunch, and although he descended for the meal he ate hardly anything, pushed away his plate, and hastened upstairs again. He did not speak. An hour later Lydia stole out-of-doors. She had no plan; she merely longed for freedom. And as she came into the street, and felt the warm sunshine upon her cheeks and her aching head, she shuddered at her new liberty.

She had escaped—for an hour! What should she do with her freedom?

There was nowhere to go. She had no friends. Her mother was in France. Ambrose was dead. She was alone. Soberly enough, with that quivering of self-consciousness which made her imagine that Sebastian was already at the shop window, craning to see in which direction she turned, Lydia made her way north. But she walked very slowly, because, although she had an instinctive knowledge of what she was going to do, she had not yet brought herself to the point of admitting the fact. She knew that she was going to Gerard's. But she pretended that she did not know.

She had gained the Heath before she would admit the truth; and when that secret wish had been discovered Lydia fell into such extreme agitation that for a time she must have sunk to

the ground if she had not staggered to a seat beside the path and collapsed into it.

"I can't go," she told herself. "He'd laugh at me. He'd be amused. He'd sneer at me. I couldn't bear it." She pictured Gerard's triumph. The picture was so vivid that she was almost turned from her purpose. But wave after wave of feeling met the dread of derision. She taunted her own fears. She called up an active recollection of that morning's scene with Sebastian. She took out of her bag the letter from the solicitors, and from contact with its harsh surface stimulated her memory and her anger with Sebastian. The longing for Gerard returned. It mounted. It pervaded her, insistent and imperious. Never before had Lydia known such longing. It was not to be endured. It drove her forward, shivering.

And as soon as she was sure that the dread of being despised was gone, and that nothing would now check her intention, Lydia grew calmer. She had a new fear: it was that she should not find Gerard at home. He might be gone back to France! No, that could never be; but he might be absent from home. Why not? The possibility was a spur the more. It was necessary that she should know this. She set out once again with her head high in pride, her lips compressed, and a sparkle of excitement in her eyes. Above her head white clouds rolled lazily before a southern breeze; about her the green of the Heath spread its now-jaded beauty. Passers loitered in the sunshine. Lydia did not heed them but went onward, unconscious of her progress. She came nearer to the address which Gerard had written upon his visiting-card. To give herself courage, she took the visiting-card once again from her bag, and read it through. Gerard, Gerard . . . He'd be surprised. He'd be stiff and formal. They would have nothing to say to one another. She'd tell him nothing about this, nothing about Sebastian . . . No, no; they would talk. She had no idea of

what they would talk about. Anything except what was unhappy. Anything except her faults . . .

The road was here. It was very quiet, very different from the noisy busyness of her own home. A great block of flats, all of a dark red brick, reared itself before her eyes. Not yet. This was not where Gerard lived. She must go on. She would ring the bell, hear it echo, wait trembling. There would be no answer . . . In imagination, Lydia died. Her step faltered. She could hardly proceed. Then she saw a woman staring at her from a window. What woman was that? Why did she stare so? Did she know? Could Lydia's intention be read? The woman drew aside the curtain, so that she might the more intently stare at the passing figure. Lydia, feeling that every eye was an accusation, was so much tempted to run that she forced herself to go more slowly. How silly! Walking at such a wild pace, of course she must excite observation. People would watch her; they would say: "Who's that woman? Where's she going? She's up to no good, I'll be bound!"

"And, oh, crumbs!" groaned Lydia to herself; "they'd be right. They'd be right!" Her breath caught.

VI

As she reached the flats she hastened in at the wide doorway, almost blinded by the contrast between this cool darkness and the brilliant sunshine which she had just left. It was a moment before she could recover sufficiently from the shock to move forward without groping. Then she listened. All was still. There was no sound at all within the building except the echo of her own footsteps. There was no lift, and there was no porter. But the staircase was very broad and roomy, and the place had an air of luxury. Before her, to the right, along a short tiled passage in black and white check, was a solid-looking door, and upon it she could see the number "2." Then

Gerard's flat, which was number six, must be two floors above, almost at the top of the building.

She crept along the passage, her shoes making a whispering sound upon the tiles, and up the broad stone staircase. At the mezzanine landing she could look through a window, down into the roadway. It, too, was silent and deserted. She must have entered unobserved. Breathing rapidly, Lydia essayed the next flight. First number 4, and then number 3. She had set a foot upon the further flight of stairs, when there was the sharp snap of a lock from the floor above, and the sound of footsteps as somebody began to run down the stairs. Lydia's heart sprang up in a sudden flurry. She stopped, panic-stricken; but for an instant only. It was Gerard.

She knew that with sublime certainty as soon as she heard his step: it had the lightness which she associated with him. The lightness and the sureness. When, round the turn of the staircase, she saw him—silhouetted against the landing window, so that his face was in shadow, while Lydia, looking upward, was at the mercy of the light's revelation—she could with difficulty keep herself from crying out.

"Lydia!" She heard his gentle voice. He did not check his progress, but was beside her in an instant, passing his arm under hers, bending towards her, kindly, without stealth or hint of surprise, with entire naturalness, as if they had long been acknowledged lovers, and as if this meeting were a customary and delightful event. A new confidence arose in Lydia. Gerard's sweetness had calmed her agitation as nothing else could have done. The tears of relief leapt to her eyes; her heart was softened. Together they moved, without speech, up the stairs; he opened the door and closed it behind them. They were alone; hidden; secret lovers, with the world forgotten.

Not by a single glance or gesture, or a changed tone, did Gerard fail her. He drew her quickly through a doorway into

a large, very lofty room, where a window commanded a view of green, and was in turn commanded by nothing but the sky and the rolling clouds.

"There!" cried Gerard. "Now isn't this a nice room? Doesn't it welcome you?" He tenderly took her by the hand and assisted to remove her out-of-door coat.

Lydia could only tell that the room was beautifully large and light; and that the colour which seemed to prevail was an enchanting blue. She had a sense of ease and comfort, of deep armchairs and a wide, softly-cushioned settee, of heavy-piled rugs upon a polished floor. But she had really no eyes for the room, since all her thoughts were for Gerard alone. She stood, flushing, feeling confused, happy, and alarmed at her own daring; while she looked young, startled, modest, as if this were in truth her first adventure with life. A perception of that must have delighted Gerard, for after laying her coat over the back of a chair he returned, gazing with marvel, to her side.

"Take off your hat!" he begged, while Lydia, under those caressing eyes, doing as she was told, raised her hands, pulled off the felt hat, and threw it aside. She was not shy now. She was all the time charmed by him and responding to him, drawing new life from the appeasement of her desire for his presence. And when she had taken off her hat it seemed the most natural thing in the world that he should receive both her hands into his own, and hold them, looking archly and triumphantly at her until a smile began to conquer her first expression of seriousness and doubt. And when once that smile had dawned Gerard drew her hands up until they were upon his shoulders, and put his own arms about her, bringing her closer, until she was looking straight into his eyes, yielding, yielding, sweetly, without dread or shyness or shame lest she should be thought too eager for the embrace. His lips were close, and she did not shrink. They kissed, with open eyes.

"My beautiful one!" Gerard whispered. He kissed her cheeks, her brow, her chin, with little kisses of loving fun, until Lydia, tantalised and amorous, gave him her lips again.

In a moment, when their cheeks were together:

"You were going out," Lydia said, in a thick voice of self-reproach. "I stopped you."

"You amuse me," Gerard told her. "You amuse me, my sweet." She felt his clasp become gently more powerful.

"Well, you *were*." Lydia was smiling in response to his speech. She could not do other than smile at him.

"I was. Quite true. And now I'm not. How odd! How very odd! Do you want me to tell you why? Perhaps you do. It is because *you* have come to see me. Now, let's sit down. No, no; you are not to go away from me. We'll sit here—there's room for two;—and I'll tell you about this flat. Don't you like it? Or shall I tell you about yourself? I think that seems to be the best thing to do. You are beautiful. You look like a child. That's the first thing."

"What, *me?*" cried Lydia. "What nonsense! Like an old woman, you mean! D'you know how old I am? I'm nearly twenty-eight."

"Incredible!" cried Gerard. "I had no idea people lived so long!"

"Don't be silly!" Lydia was laughing, her eyes brimming with love. She could not prevent herself from looking at him with stealth when she thought he was not observing her. And whenever she looked with stealth she was discomfited, because Gerard always surprised her glance and laughed it away, until she was tempted to lay her face upon his hands in humility.

"Yes," he continued, "you look like a child. But you have the white hair appropriate to your age."

"And the wrinkles," interposed Lydia.

"I see none." He looked more closely, so that Lydia, peeping, glanced quickly away in case he should read too much in her

eyes. "I see a child who badly needs a holiday. Who is coming to France, not to-morrow (when I may have to go myself), but next week, next week . . . as soon as she can come . . . when she shall have the holiday she needs, and happiness. . . . How clearly I see it all!"

"Yes, don't you!" ironically commented Lydia, holding his hands to her cheek. "Don't you think I'm awful, coming here?" She could not restrain any longer the expression of her secret terror.

"I do," agreed Gerard. "So *modern*."

"No, be serious. I can't believe it's me."

"Oh, it's you, all right. I can hardly hide my sense of outrage. Once a Puritan, you know, always a Puritan. I can't excuse you. There *is* no excuse!"

"Ah, you don't know!" hinted Lydia. "But I shan't tell you."

"No, you won't tell me," agreed Gerard. "Unless it may be, of course, just a kindness on your part. How kind you are! I think it must be a kindness—because I was so lonely that I was going out to try and forget how lonely I was!"

"Well, I've fallen in love with you, that's all," said Lydia. "There!" She drew away from him with an exclamation of distress, really half-shocked at herself for disclosing the truth. "I wonder why I said that! It's your nonsense. And I said I wouldn't come. I said——"

"You fell in love with me when you first saw me," said Gerard. "When I also fell in love with *you*."

Lydia shook her head.

"No, I didn't," she said. "I laughed at you. I called you 'Napoleon' and 'Mussolini.' " She spoke in a very low tone, with her head bent, as if she begged his forgiveness. "That wasn't love, *was* it!"

"Certainly!" answered Gerard. "Of the most flattering sort. You gave me a name. To most people one sees one gives no

name whatever. Your attention was arrested. You gave me the names of two super-men. Now a psycho-analyst——"

"A what?" asked Lydia.

"Never mind. I shall always think you fell in love with me at sight."

"Sebastian wanted to go and punch your head," crowed Lydia. "You stared at me."

"Did I? I beg your pardon for that. But it is very bad taste to mention Sebastian to me," said Gerard. "I am *afraid* of Sebastian. He had a very quick eye and a very biting tongue. He is also master of a subject which I greatly dislike. And I propose, if she agrees, to take his wife away from him; so I am branded as an immoral fellow and a cad."

"No!" cried Lydia. "You're not!"

"It *is* so. You can't deny it. But I have no qualm. Do I seem to have any qualm? On the contrary. You would be in no danger from me if you didn't love me. Do you agree?"

"I'm in awful danger," Lydia said, thickly. Her head fell to his shoulder.

They kissed again, at first gently and lightly, as if in play, but then more seriously, and at last with passion. Lydia felt herself slipping, slipping from the world she had known, from every familiar knowledge and experience, into an uncharted world of sensation. She lost the sense of place and time, but dreamed in Gerard's arms, while out-of-doors the clouds darkened, and storm gathered, and the wind rose. And Gerard's lips were pressed against her hair and her temples, and she felt the delicious roughness of his cheek against her own, and was pressed ever more closely in his arms, closer and closer, until she could not breathe, but started away, drowsy, intoxicated, but still mistress of herself. As if through the haze of dream, she stared at Gerard's face, at his lips and his eyes, seeking for the truth, seeking for proof of that secret bond which should link them for ever.

"Do you love me?" It was quick, breathless, hardly audible.

Gerard met her gaze with the same loving seriousness.

"I love you," he said. "And you?"

Lydia nodded slowly, unable to control her drowsy head. Her eyes were dark and liquid, as though with sorrow; but her lips were parted in a smile.

"Somehow . . . I think I . . . *must*," she murmured, with such struggling, painful breath that she seemed to drawl the words. "Because I've . . . never . . . felt like this . . . before in all my life . . . Gerard . . ." And as she spoke she leaned towards him, heavy, voluptuous, with closed eyes yielding herself in stupor to his caresses.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: REACTION

I

THE storm abated somewhat towards six o'clock; and within half-an-hour of that time Lydia was at home. Twice she had walked past the shop, unable to bring herself to the ordeal of entry. But at last, brusquely, she ran in, and up to the bedroom. She did not dare to stay. She could not even bring herself, so violently were her hands trembling, to comb her hair. Instead, she hastened down the stairs again, banging in her frantic hurry the door at the head of the lower flight; and gained the kitchen. Here, for a time, she was safe. Sebastian would not follow her. She had seen his humped shoulders at the desk, and a single sharp glance as she passed. It had suffocated her. How could she face him? What lie was she to tell? No lie—supposing she were to tell him the truth! It would kill him. He would die. The thought of it made her shudder. If he should follow her down here . . . Her prayer was that he would still be angry with her, that he would stay where he was until the last moment, and that when they met some part of her agitation would be set down to continued memory of their morning quarrel. Then she would have some merciful respite. She could think of a plan . . . of many plans. Her heart sank. What plans?

"What am I to say to him?" she thought, in desperation. "Oh, I'm wicked! And happy! Happy, happy! But frightened to death, too!"

If she allowed herself to think, she would grow sick with fear. If she remembered her joy she would be so filled again with longing for Gerard that she would not be able to bear to stay where she was. What if she fled? Gerard was returning to France the next day. He would be gone. She would be by herself. What to do? Guilt, the sense of irremediable wickedness, weighed her down. Guilt, lightened by a sparkling of joy.

They had begun to speak of a plan. What had they said? She could not remember. It had all been so hurried, for at the last she had been afraid. Her one thought had been to reach home while it was still possible to plead the storm as an excuse for her long absence. She had been wild to be gone, and wild to stay; and now she knew nothing of any plan. Where was she to write to Gerard? How was she to see him? She *must* see him. It wouldn't do to write to his address in France, because her mother and father would wonder what she was writing about. They would know. Everybody would know. And she couldn't go there *now*.

Sebastian would look at her; he would see what was amiss; he would jump to some conclusion. What? He'd think of the solicitors. He'd think she had been there about the legacy; when in fact she had thought no more of it. He was not jealous of Gerard. He knew nothing of that: his suspicion had never been aroused. Was she safe? Safe for a time? Until they made a plan? Oh, God, why did she shiver so! He would be bound to notice, and to guess . . . something. Not the reality; but bad enough. What then? She couldn't face him. She *couldn't*.

What was that? Almost screaming, Lydia dragged open the drawer in the dresser in which she kept her tablecloths. She whipped a cloth out of it and shook and shook while the starched folds clung, until she had spread it upon the table. She had heard above the unmistakable squeal of the handle at the top of the stairs. She could imagine Sebastian pausing there, his fingers to his straggly moustache, debating with himself. Knives, forks . . . a cruet . . . What on earth was he doing? The suspense was unbearable. He must be standing by the door. What did he want? He would come down and speak to her, and she would lose control of herself and cry out, taunting him with his ignominy . . . She mustn't go mad. She must keep her head. Glasses, bread . . . As if she could eat or drink! It would be a pretence for them both.

Why didn't he come, if he was coming? She would say she had been to the pictures—anything. She would say, in a false voice, that the rain had been so bad . . . He knew she didn't care about rain. He knew very well that never before in all the six years of their life together had she failed to come home in good time, whatever the weather. He would put it all down to their quarrel. He'd think she was sulking. If only he would think that. If only she knew what he was doing. Had he crept down the stairs? Was he even now watching her in secret? If only he'd do *something*. She couldn't bear the suspense. It crazed her.

While Lydia thus frantically tore her thoughts, she was moving swiftly about the kitchen, and laying the table for their cold supper. And she was listening at the time for some further sound from above. It came at last. Slap, slap, slap . . . Sebastian was slowly descending the stairs, his slippers flapping at each step. He would be here in a minute. What was she to say to him? How was she to *look* at him? So lacerated by her fears, Lydia could bear no more. She drew herself up, near the window, facing the door, her face like marble, and her body quivering. The light which still struck through the bars of the grating above her head served to protect her from too curious scrutiny; but Lydia did not know this. She only knew that she was at bay, and that she could no longer trust in her own power of endurance. The steps were lower now. She saw the door moving. Sebastian's fingers showed upon its edge. An instant later he appeared in the room, a bowed figure, so bent with suffering that Lydia drew a quick, shuddering breath. Her heart was stabbed with pity for him.

II

"Lydia, old girl," began Sebastian. How grey he was! How thin! The shape of his skull could be plainly seen, and his

high cheek bones. His cheeks were sunken. He spoke with great difficulty, stammering a little, and in a thin voice of age. "I heard you come in." There was a long pause, while he tried in vain to pronounce what was to follow. At length it came, gaspingly: "Look here, I'm sorry. I didn't—of course I didn't —you *know* I didn't—*couldn't*—mean what I said this morning. It was . . . rotten of me. Rotten! I don't know what I was . . . thinking about. It was *rotten.* There's no other word."

Lydia remained standing by the window, the light striking her hair. Her breast began to heave. She was ashamed to see him stooping so humbly before her, pleading in that broken voice. Ashamed of her aversion from him. Ashamed of his dishonour. She could not meet the eyes which timidly sought hers.

"Can't we——" Sebastian made a vague gesture with both his hands.

"I know," she faltered at length.

"You see, I'm all strung up," continued Sebastian. "I hardly know what I'm saying now."

Almost weeping, Lydia uttered a groan.

"Yes," she answered, very low. "I know that. Oh, I've been beastly to you."

He could not answer her, but stood wearily with the shadow darkening his face and emphasising its hideous emaciation. His lips moved. Finally, after intolerable silence, and in the same tired, thin voice, he went on:

"Beastly, eh? I don't know. We've both of us . . . said things we never meant to say. But I've *thought* 'em, my dear, which is worse. And that's where I've been wrong. I oughtn't to have. I ought to have known you better."

Oh, God! If he would only go! If he would stop torturing her! Lydia was choking.

"But the trouble is that I'm getting old," Sebastian said.

"And I know it. That makes me a jealous fool . . . I see you so——" Again that vague, feeble gesture. "I ought to have more sense. More strength, too. I begin to feel that I'm contemptible. When you didn't come back this afternoon, I nearly . . . went off my head. I thought . . ." He essayed a smile, which was but a grimace. "I was afraid you'd gone . . . for good. That was stupid of me. But it just shows you——"

"Don't!" cried Lydia, passionately. "I can't *stand* it!"

"I'm trying . . . to tell you what a fool I am," persisted Sebastian. "And you know it already. I know you do. But I've been in Hell this afternoon, old girl. In Hell. And if that's what Hell is, I'm all for Heaven. I've had a lesson I shan't forget." He gave a little laugh. Then he added, apologetically: "Excuse me for coming and maundering on like this. I only wanted to tell you about it, so that we needn't have any more . . . song and dance. You see what I mean. I mean, I believe you. I'd believe you against the world. I've never really done anything else."

Lydia could endure no more. She raised her hands wildly.

"Oh, stop, stop!" she cried, in a loud weeping voice of horror. "Stop it, I tell you! You'll send me mad!"

Driven by the frantic desire to escape, she would have brushed by him, and so out of the room; but in order to reach the door she was compelled to approach Sebastian, who unconsciously extended an arm to bar her progress. Shrinking away from him, Lydia turned, felt herself trapped, and at last stumbled to the table, where, with her arms stretched out before her, and her head pressed down upon them, she gave way to the terrible sobbing which she could no longer restrain.

Sebastian's hand was laid gently upon her shoulder, and she did not shrink from it. She hardly knew that the hand was there. Shuddering, she looked into the depths of her own heart.

III

She knew that Gerard would come to her. She waited. It was her one hope. He would come, and he would tell her what she must do. This morning it rained heavily, and Lydia, watching the rain, felt her courage sinking lower and lower. Now that she was alone, now that the excitement had died away, she was weary. Lassitude bowed her shoulders. She was less afraid than she had been; but the ardour of her spirit was oppressed and so much stress of excitement had left her weak.

From the window she could see the deserted street, and the needle-like splashing of the rain, and the running gutters. Boys slouched past under the protection of heavy sacks that made them resemble nuns, but nuns who were impossible slovens. One drenched figure of a woman with a shopping bag attracted Lydia's attention. Otherwise she stood inertly waiting. Sebastian had left immediately after breakfast, drawn away by business. He would return later; as Lydia, sighing, knew very well. Meanwhile, in spite of her dreary outward calm, she had but one eager anticipation. Gerard would come. For that she scanned the distance in either direction.

The time passed. Still Lydia waited. She was not impatient; her spirit grew duller as the minutes fled, her eyes more fixed. He would not fail her.

At last, from the road which branched almost opposite to the shop, a cab came scudding. She could see the driver's waterproof apron: nothing more. But a stirring within her told the story of her hope. She grew breathless as the cab slackened speed. It was stopping. Was it he? She had no eyes for the drip of accumulated rain from the cab's roof, no ears for the roaring of its engine. She had caught sight of a dark figure within; and an instant later the clicking crash of a closing door accompanied Gerard's leap to the pavement.

He was here! The tears started to Lydia's eyes. A faint sob

escaped her lips. She moved forward. One blurred glimpse of that olive face and those broad shoulders, and she was in his arms. Such anguished delight as she then knew caused her to lose command of herself, and she clung vehemently, with gasping breath, straining him to her breast as if they had been parting for ever.

"You have been having a bad time?" Gerard said, quickly. "You are regretting?"

"No. Bad time, yes," whispered Lydia, almost groaning. "He's ill. I'm hurting him. I don't know what I'm to do about him. Sometimes I feel——" She checked herself, and hurried on: "Am I to come or stay? Tell me what I'm to do."

"Come now," Gerard said. "This moment."

Lydia jumped in his arms: she was irresolute.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Too quick. Lots of reasons. I wish I could. I wonder . . . No, I can't!"

Gerard held her away at arm's length. He was very grave—not the teasing and the passionate Gerard of yesterday. The Gerard she had first seen. His eyes held all the riches of his unexplored nature. She was drowning in them.

"I love you," he said. "What do you want me to tell you to do?" He smiled as he spoke, but without any lightening of the eyes. "You can go to Calais as soon as you are ready. But perhaps I shan't be there."

Lydia's clasp slackened.

"You won't be there?" she breathed. "What am I to do?"

"I am not sure. I have to go and see some friends at Pourville. One of them is ill."

Harshly, Lydia said:

"You don't want me to come."

Gerard took no notice of that cry of fear. He said:

"I'll come back for you in a fortnight. Do you want me to see him?"

"Gracious, no! And I can't live—like this—without you—for a fortnight." Lydia was shuddering in his arms. "I can't, really."

"Visit your father and mother."

"With *this* on my conscience? No!" she cried. Then: "I'll manage."

Gerard kissed her again, very sweetly, with no trace of yesterday's passion, until she was smiling. Her bold, flying eyes evaded him.

"Come to Dieppe," he said at last. "Why not? It is the best thing of all. Yes!" he exclaimed. "The best thing of all. I will meet you at Dieppe on whatever day you cross. I shall have my car. I'll give you my address. You can telegraph. Tell people you are going to see your mother and father. It will be true—in time."

Her eyelashes flickering, Lydia listened. Did her spirits sink at that?

"You *do* want me?" she whispered. "You're sure? It's everything to me."

Gerard looked at her with such irony that she felt her cheeks growing hot.

"Are you unjust?" he asked.

Lydia nodded her head.

"Yes, I am," she murmured.

"Come with me now. I am on my way. You see?" He jerked his head towards the waiting cab. The temptation was almost overwhelming.

"No," groaned Lydia, at last. "I've told him I shall be here this evening."

Gerard's brows leapt. His shoulders moved in the slightest of shrugs.

"Oh, come! isn't that straining at a gnat?" he said. "What

are your scruples? He would know one day, two days earlier. . . ."

But Lydia knew that she would not consent.

"You've only got a few minutes," she said. "There's no time."

"True," answered Gerard, looking at his watch. "I must go. But if you would come, too, we should both be happier. And sooner." He smiled, gently drawing her hand towards him. "Put on your hat! Don't be too long, though."

Lydia faltered:

"But I promised!"

An odd expression appeared in the eyes she so anxiously sought. It was not anger, but love; not contempt, but admiration.

"Then I shall urge you no more. You must do what you think is right. Look, let me give you the address of my friends at Pourville. Telegraph to me there. I shall meet the boat. If I am not at the quayside when you arrive, don't be afraid. Wait for me. Ignore everybody else. I shall soon come. But it will be by car, and cars are sometimes treacherous things. They are monsters. I am afraid of them. You know that."

Lydia knew that. She knew why. She pressed her cheek to his.

"I shan't be afraid," she said.

"You must be very careful."

"Very careful," she agreed, obediently.

"Of trains and cars. And people."

Lydia was smiling. It was very strange to her to be treated as a child. It was new and delightful. She hung upon his words.

"I'll take great care," she assured him. "So long as you don't——"

"Fail you? I shan't fail you. You believe that?" He took her once again in his arms, looking at her with that serious tenderness which filled her heart with pride.

Lydia nodded. She tried to smile again, but her lips had grown suddenly stiff, so that she could only lay her head upon his shoulder, hiding the tears which had started to her eyes.

A moment afterwards, he was gone. She went out of doors with him, and stood in the rain, watching the cab until it was lost to sight. Then she returned, humming gaily, to the shop; and as the door-bell rang above her head, and as she found herself confronted by the menacing accumulation of Sebastian's stock, such misery rushed back upon her that she dragged herself with difficulty to the desk at the back of the shop and sat there for an hour in a stupor of despair.

IV

Once that stupor had passed, it was succeeded by such excitement that she could no longer sit still. She was to go, not to-day, but soon—as soon as she wished. It was for *her* to decide! What a sense of freedom that knowledge gave her! As soon as she was ready . . . She would tell Sebastian that she was going to stay with her mother. And then she would . . . He would get used to her absence. She would write and tell him . . . How cowardly! No, she must think of something better than that. The thought of Sebastian, going about his work, thinking fondly of her, when all the time she had no intention of returning, was not bearable. But she was going. She had made up her mind to that. It remained only to decide upon the day.

To-morrow she would go and see the solicitors. And she would buy her ticket for Dieppe. For what day? Lydia shivered with excitement. She'd see. She mustn't decide this minute. First she must gather her clothes together; and put them so that they could be easily packed. Her passport . . . Sebastian would want to come and see her off. That would not do. She must stop it. She'd tell him he mustn't leave his work.

She'd choose a day when he *couldn't* do so. That thought of the need for such adroitness delighted her. For an instant she was radiant with gaiety.

With eager steps she ran up to the bedroom. Her head was full of plans. She would have to get some money from the bank. Oooh! She needed such a lot of things! Clothes and clothes! She couldn't go to France—to *France*, mind you!—in rags. Gerard might want to introduce her to his friends—

Would he? She felt cold. Perhaps he wouldn't. It was one thing for a man to love you; and another for him to . . .

Lydia pondered. She nodded very slowly. Yes, she had not thought of that before. Hitherto she had been able to hold up her head. Now, she'd have to hide. She wouldn't! She wouldn't hide. She'd rather be sneered at than hide. Besides, nobody knew her. Besides, she didn't care. She loved Gerard!

"That's bluster!" said Lydia. With pale face, she sat upon the bed and looked straight before her at the wallpaper. "That's all that is. Well, I ought to have thought of it before. . . ." Groaning, she added: "There's one or two other things I ought to have thought of."

With a thoughtful whistle, she got up from the bed, and drew out the big drawer at the bottom of the wardrobe. It was very full of all sorts of things, from Sebastian's shirts to her own nightdresses; and she began carefully to lay her clothes upon the bed, to decide what she would take and what she must buy. One of the garments caught a shirt, and disarranged it, so that Lydia, in replacing the shirt, noticed that it was all worn at the wrist-band.

"I ought to mend that," she said to herself. "Else he'll put it into holes . . ." A second thought made her start: "Why, of course, if I'm going, he won't have anybody . . ." There flashed across her mind a swift picture of Sebastian's complete helplessness. She saw him incapable even of sending his clothes to the laundry, incapable of preparing himself a meal——

"I can't go!" she thought, clearly. "It's absurd! You *can't* leave a man . . ."

That threw her into a further trembling. Sebastian could do nothing for himself. At his trade he was clever; but he had always been indifferent to his own comfort and nourishment, and he had been well-looked-after for six years.

"It's no good," said Lydia. "He'll be all alone. Nobody to look after him. What's he done to me that I can desert him? What! He's given me all he can. And I'm going to throw it back in his face. I shall be a murderess . . ."

"I'm a coward. That's it. A greedy coward. Either way, I should be a coward. But I can't stand it. I can't go and leave him . . ."

Mechanically, she began to lay her clothes back again in the drawer from which they had been taken. Her fingers had grown clumsy, and some of the folds were spoiled. She knelt down, soberly pulling out the folded parts.

"I shall never see Gerard again," she thought. "He won't come . . . He won't think much of me. He'll think it's funny of me to change . . . He'll think I never meant it . . . I *did* mean it. He'd never believe how much I meant it; what joy . . . I love him. Everything. It's funny how I can love him so much. I never thought I could love anybody like this. If I didn't see him again I think I should die of misery . . . Oh, my God! What am I going to do! I wish I could die!"

As she tried to straighten the folds, the tears began to blind her eyes. Presently they dropped upon the uppermost garments, spreading into grey splashes upon the white material. And as she saw that they were doing this Lydia sat back upon her heels, the tears running down her cheeks and coming all salt into her mouth.

"I'm *going!*" she cried out, in a weeping voice. "I've said I'll go. I told Gerard I'd go. And I'm going. Because if I stayed here——"

With trembling hands she began slowly to gather the clothes together again. She laid them out upon the bed, a poor little pile of under-linen, all of it made by herself, with patient sewing and embroidery. At last, at the bottom of the drawer, she found the passports where she had put them again after Gerard's first visit. She remembered all that had happened then. A shuddering sigh escaped her lips. Throwing Sebastian's back into its place, she carefully added her own to the pile upon the bed, and then stood back, regarding the result of her labour. The tears were still upon her cheeks; but as she looked at the clothes she remembered Gerard, and the way in which he had teased her and kissed her, and a slow smile of tormented happiness stole to her lips. Suddenly she fell upon her knees by the bed, burying her face.

"I'm bad," she thought. "I'm wicked. But I love him, and I'm——"

From below stairs came the ringing of the door-bell, and as she sprang up and ran to the top of the staircase, she heard Sebastian's voice.

"All right, Lydia. Only me."

A surge of bitter feeling rose in her breast and brought a strangled cry to her throat. She shook her two clenched fists in the air. The feeling was one of hatred. She had injured him. She could not forgive herself. Nor Sebastian.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: ACCIDENT

I

Was everything ready? Lydia stood in the bedroom, taking a last glance round. Her little dressing-case rested upon a chair near the door; her hat and coat and gloves lay on the bed, ready to be assumed. She was alone; for Sebastian had gone out to find a cab in which she could travel all the way to Victoria. He was not to come with her, and he had insisted upon the cab as an alternative.

She must act quickly; for he would be back again in a moment. Yet she paused, irresolute. To do that which she had planned was so difficult that she could not bring herself to it. A hundred times she had tried, without success; and now it was almost too late. Would it not be better that she should write to him from France? To say then that she had decided not to come back? No, no. It must be done *now*. She must be able to feel that what she was doing was irrevocable. Anything else was only sentimental and cowardly.

Well, *this* was cowardly. Why had she not told him herself? Too late now. Too late for everything except this.

Taking a pencil in her hand, she scrawled unsteadily upon a piece of paper:

Dear Sebastian: Though I've said I'm going to Mum and Dad that isn't true. I'm not coming back—ever. I've gone to Gerard. You never dreamt of that, did you? Nor did I. But it's true. Good-bye, my dear. I'm no good to you any longer, and I shall be happy. It hasn't been easy. It's you I worry about —but I don't know what else to do. Don't take it too hard. I'm not worth it. Mrs. Way will look after you. You've been splendid to me. I know that, and always did. Loved you for it, and this is how I serve you.

Lydia.

She could not help adding as a postscript the words: "You were *quite wrong* about A. Gerard's different.

"Lydia!" called Sebastian, from below stairs. "Lydia!"

With vehement haste she thrust the blotted letter into an envelope, which she sealed and propped up on the edge of the dressing-table. "For Sebastian." He would not see it there until she was in France. She must be careful, in going out of the room, to go quietly, or else the curtain might fly up and sweep the letter away. Her coat; her hat——

She ran to the door and wrenched it open, seizing her dressing-case. The door-handle slipped from her fingers, the curtain bellied, and the door slammed behind her. She hastened down the stairs, brushing as she went against the treasures which were planted upon each side of every stair. She was in the shop, ready to go, and she could see that Sebastian was waiting impatiently. He had been tapping his foot at her delay.

"Buck up, old girl; he's there now," Sebastian cried.

Lydia caught a glimpse of the outline of a cab outside the shop.

"There's your dinner all ready on the kitchen table," she said, hurriedly. "You'll have to get your own tea. But I've arranged with Mrs. Way——"

"Yes, yes," answered Sebastian. "That's all right. Mother Way'll look after me. Where's the bag? Got your passport? I suppose they'll meet you? Here we are . . ." He was out at the door of the shop a moment later, and had set the dressing-case upon the seat of the cab. He seemed very nervous, as if he were glad she was going, as if he wanted her to go instantly, as if he feared to be alone with her or to have any but the most ordinary of conversation. And as Lydia slowly followed him into the street he spoke to the driver of the cab, giving the necessary directions, and prepared to help Lydia to her place.

"Give them my love," he said. "Send me a card when you

arrive. Don't trouble to write letters until you're settled down. And give Gerard my respectful compliments." He smiled with a sort of pale malice, as he spoke; but Lydia could not account for that, and attributed the smile to nerves. She gave him her cheek to kiss. Then, repenting, she kissed him upon the lips. The last time!

"Good-bye, my dear," she said, brokenly. He was like a Chinaman; his hair was feathered by the breeze. . . . She saw his thin shoulders and the nervous movement of his whole body.

"Good-bye, dear. Cheer up!" Sebastian grimaced at her. She felt the fierce pressure of his fingers about her hand, groped her way into the cab, and sat there white-faced and still while Sebastian gave the word. Then he was gone—as if he had faded from the picture; and she did not look back, but sat huddled in the corner, trembling, wondering if for any reason he would go straight up to the bedroom and see her letter. If he did——

Oh, she was a beast! Worse than a beast! And she could not cry. She was cold and desperate. Her teeth were set. This was the end of one life, and the beginning of another.

II

The sea glittered brilliantly in the mid-day sunshine, shimmering like a kaleidoscope. If she looked into the distance, Lydia could imagine that the ship was standing almost without movement. Impatience seized her. But when she saw how the thick stream of churned water flowed away from the stern, white and turbulent, she had a buoyant sense of adventure. The Seven Sisters gleamed behind, the black smoke rolled lazily from the ship's funnel, there was a slight quivering motion, the most gentle swaying; and a faint breeze that whipped colour into Lydia's cheeks. And Lydia herself, too

timid to thread her way among the loungers and the people who lay in deck chairs, and too convulsed with excitement to keep still, trod up and down a small unoccupied portion of the deck which she had discovered behind some ventilators. She tightly clutched her little handbag, shivered uncontrollably, exulted in all the strange beauties to which the journey had introduced her, and at last looked ahead with such hope and fear that the horrors through which she had passed, while they contributed to her agitation, sang from her immediate concern.

Everything was marvellous to her. The greyness of the deck, the whiteness of the paint, the voices of the travellers, the trepidation, the beautiful sight of the receding cliffs. Newhaven was already hidden. Aloft, beyond the gently moving spars, a blue sky without cloud seemed to promise endless Summer. The sun warmed the breeze and warmed her heart. It was as if a dark curtain concealed from her thoughts any distinct memory of the shop, of the green and red bedroom, of the dark kitchen with the grating above the window, of Sebastian as he had looked, standing by the cab in the moment of farewell. All had faded. The agony of those last hours was already years away, like the sorrows of childhood. She glanced back, saw only the white cliffs, and stared forward again, to the land of promise. No doubt was permitted to mar her vision of happiness to come.

The cliffs were no more than a rim of light at the edge of the friendly sea. Their shape had become indistinct. How the black smoke hung in the air; and how the foam ran out, like soapsuds, streaming into the distance! Were all these people as excited as she? Looking forward as much to happiness? Lydia peeped at some of the faces near her. They were all strange, all English. The women: did she like them? They strolled confidently, in their short skirts, speaking with that exaggerated indistinctness which Lydia so half-enviously

despised. Smarties! They were all showing off, with their loud voices and their bad manners. All trying to pretend they were "somebodies," when really they were nothing whatever. They looked down their noses at her. Oho, they didn't miss much! They saw that her clothes were cheap! Their own were not. She was a little defensive at the encounter—not upon moral ground, but because she felt that they had "seen life." They had their own dressmakers with fancy Christian names. They were all dressed alike. "Exclusive models" that were all the same! Voices that could not be told apart! They were all saying and seeing, thinking and doing, what they "ought" to say and see, think and do. Finally, they took no notice of Lydia. They were going to French seaside resorts because it was smarter to go there than it would have been to go to Eastbourne or Weymouth, Margate or Hastings. Lydia was doing because she was in love.

The men—there was none to compare with Gerard! Beside him they would—every one—have seemed colourless, patterned, in their uniformity of tweeds, their perfunctory manners. Ah, but Gerard was rich. You couldn't get to the bottom of him. You started thinking of him, and there was no end to what you could imagine. He made you laugh deep inside yourself—with love. And he made you fierce and humble, proud one minute and starving the next. Oh, he was *man;* and these men were machine-made nothings. They didn't surprise and tantalise you. They didn't make you feel you'd follow them to the end of the world! She bent her head, smiling in triumph. But they were better than the women.

It was an hour since the boat had started. Wasn't there any sign of France yet? Lydia stepped out to the side, and stared ahead. Nothing was to be seen but green water, idly rocking in the calm, shining like polished metal, and throwing sparkles of reflection back to the hot sun. Lovely sight! She walked towards the bows, and found a crowd of people standing at

the end of the deck, overlooking a lower deck, where sailors worked. Here the breeze, created by the ship's own movement, was stronger and colder, and the slow lifting of the ship's bows could be observed, and a sense of the sea's depth below that polished surface could fill a person with fear. But ahead, nothing. No land, not a sail or funnel above the horizon. Tiring of tip-toed effort to see across the shoulders of these others, Lydia strolled back to her old post, to find it in the occupation of two sharp-faced middle-aged women. The voice of one of them was carried upon the breeze. She was saying:

"It was such *impudence!* I really don't know what things are coming to! One has to be *very* firm with those sort of people!"

Lydia turned away, ironic, ready to comment, checking her cheeky imagined reply to such a hag. What a lot of old trots there were! They roved the earth, talking about income tax and servants, dry toast and boarding houses, wherever they went. They were like locusts. Well, she didn't know what locusts were like; but any way they were like *that*. Lydia disapproved most members of her own sex, especially when they opened their mouths.

Wasn't France in sight *yet?* She tapped her foot impatiently upon the deck. She was tired of this voyage. It was all the same. She wanted to see Dieppe. She wanted to hear the strange voices, see the strange buildings. She had tears in her eyes. Yes, it wasn't that at all. Why pretend? She wanted to see Gerard. She wanted to be loved by him. Let her once see him, and feel his arms round her, and his rough cheek against her own, and all this feeling of being bottled and clamped would pass. She would feel *really* free. At present, she had a tremor of incredulity, something panic-stricken, as if she were an escaped prisoner, not yet across the border.

They couldn't be going as fast as they had been. Yes, they were! All that remained of England was a mist. The smoke

still hung in the air, and the water in the wake of the ship still churned like a mill-race. It was Lydia who was at fault. She was too eager, as her watch showed. Why, it would be hours yet before they could hope to arrive. How was she to endure the delay? If she was fidgeting already, what would she be doing at the end of the journey? Hitherto, everything had been exciting. First the escape from home, then the short railway journey, finally the embarkation. How she had shivered, sitting in the train, for fear lest Sebastian should come running from carriage to carriage! How she had relaxed, still shivering, as the guard waved his flag and blew his whistle! She had been thrilled and happy. Now she felt faint and as if her nerves were all beginning to throb and twist like the little malignant devils they were. Nowhere to sit down, nowhere to walk. She was surrounded by unfriendly faces. These were the travelling English. Except for a sailor, who was busy, there was not within sight, as far as Lydia could distinguish, one of the homely vulgar breed which she loved.

"No wonder the English are popular wherever they go!" savagely thought Lydia. "I b'lieve the nice ones all stop at home and go to Brighton."

With a ferocious loneliness, she walked the small portion of deck open to her.

III

As the ship neared land, Lydia continued upon the port side of the deck, watching the grey line gradually taking colour. A cliff, not unlike those which she had left behind her, but less brilliant, whitened below the green. A lighthouse stood clear. But she found herself alone as a watcher, and accordingly hastened to the starboard side, to discover the fringe of the town of Dieppe under her eyes. A stretch of yellow sand; some flat grass-land, an odd, low building; and, farther away, a long row of houses. She was disappointed. The sight was

pretty, but not in accordance with what she had anticipated. The houses were so grey as to seem insignificant. She said, crestfallen, "Well, is this *all?*" Then something was fired within her, and she felt a flurry of admiration. She had expected too much. Or something different. But this was just as extraordinary . . . It was wonderful. It was France. She was there!

They were proceeding much more slowly. A little stone pier was close at hand. She could see tiny black figures upon the sands; and as she strained her eyes to look at them they were blotted out by the pier, upon which a small group of people stood watching the incoming steamer. They were French! Great laughter shook Lydia—not the laughter of amusement, but the laughter of delight. She could have cried out to these people; but, instead, she returned their gaze with an air of coolness which did not express the tremulous joy in her heart. How exciting it was! This was new, incredible, enchanting! In a few moments she would be ashore, and Gerard would be there to welcome her. Hey, how lovely! Perhaps he was even one of those who waited here. Eagerly she scanned the interested faces.

He was not there. The ship left the pier behind, and entered the harbour. Now indeed Lydia saw the true town. It was like nothing she had ever known before. She could see men in the dirty blouses and baggy corduroy trousers which had been familiar to her hitherto only in pictures. If she looked across her shoulder, as she once or twice did, to the other side of the harbour, she could see more and more houses piled above a great wall, and big posters in unfamiliar colours; while at her feet the leisurely work of the quayside, where all appear to be loungers, proceeded apace. A few women, hatless, in black woollen shawls, observed the ship, as did more dark-moustached men with their peaked caps perched at an angle so rakish and apache-like that they seemed quite

alarming. A convulsive little bell rang within the ship in tiny spasms of imperious noise. They had stopped. No, they still moved. Something was making a great splashing in the water. Ropes were being thrown. Greetings were waved. Some of the old men upon the quay shook open hands of welcome—or of threat—Lydia could not be sure which—at the sailors. Impassive policemen in unfamiliar uniform surveyed the scene with irony.

Lydia felt like a child. She was by this time solitary upon the upper deck, for all the other passengers were already striving to be first upon the gangway; and she looked down, glancing here and there among the increasing crowd upon the quayside, searching for Gerard. When she did not see him, an odd feeling of fright took possession of her. She scanned the faces with greater timidity. Were there cars here? Yes, she could see some cars. But not Gerard. She could see a train waiting in the roadway, a tall train, much taller than those to which she was accustomed. She could see men and vehicles, dogs, carts, and children. But she could not see Gerard.

At that instant the gangways were run aboard, and a host of men in blue blouses rushed on to the ship, shouting, as if they were bent upon plundering everybody there. They shouted something strange, charged up to the passengers, seized bags, tapped the little numbers which they bore, all the time shouting their peculiar war-cry. How serious! how frantic! they were. They seemed to say: "Your money or your life!" Lydia could not help laughing at the men; but she moved towards the stairs, carrying her own small dressing-case, unwilling to leave her point of vantage, from which at any moment she might see Gerard walking calmly through the crowd.

She was ashore, and alone. There was no Gerard. Her heart sank. Her lip quivered. Men in uniform snatched at her arm and pointed in the direction which they wished her to take,

saying something that she did not understand; and she followed the other passengers. She was in a dream. She did not know what happened to her. She only knew that when everybody else had passed on, and when she stood in the street, holding her dressing-case, she could see no sign of Gerard.

What had he said? Of course! He had warned her that he might be late. He had told her not to be afraid. How silly of her to forget that! With a lightened heart, Lydia walked slowly forward; but she became afraid of going too far, and so she returned to the spot from which she had departed. Below her was the ugly dark water of the basin; above her hung dilapidated buildings, which seemed to be rotting in the sun. At her side the train awaited the signal to start. She saw some of those who had travelled by the ship sitting in their carriages, or still busy with the arrangement of luggage, and imagined them hurrying through the countryside to Paris, a hundred miles away. In one of the coaches tables were already laid for lunch. They would eat at ease, while the country spread itself before them. Oh, the lucky ones! Something made Lydia wander the length of the train in order to see the big engine and the driver and firemen who were already in their places—the engine-driver a grimed fat man with a rolling dark eye and a tongue that made the firemen grin like a nigger-minstrel. And, having gone so far, she followed the railway-line along the quay until she reached a wider part of the road, where some very crumbling, but very picturesque arcades, like nothing else she had ever seen, brought her to an admiring stand.

The wide space along which Lydia had come now curved off to the left, and before her was a narrow street containing many shops. She could not resist a peep at it, but the shops proved less interesting than she had hoped, and, having been pushed off the pavement by a passing man, she was about to go back towards the little railway-platform, when a large and powerful yellow motor-car rounded the corner of the Avenue

Duquesne at high speed and would have knocked her down if she had not run swiftly just in time to save herself from its brilliant bonnet. The car, in a cloud of smoke and dust, continued along beside the arcades, and Lydia watched it until it disappeared; but she had noticed the appearance of the driver, a very pallid youth of considerable pretentiousness, who wore a colossal check-patterned cap cocked over one eye. He was lolling back in his seat, with a faint, sneering smile upon his wan face, and was over-manipulating the steering-wheel with one lemon-gloved hand, while a cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth. Beside him in the car was an incredibly flaxen doll-like woman, who seemed to be as inipid as she was certainly pretty. What a pair! And what a way to drive! Why, they might *kill* somebody, driving like that! It was dangerous. It was worse than dangerous.

"So this is France," murmured Lydia. "And those are the French! What is it Dad always says about them? Oh, I'm getting awful. First the English on the boat; and then the French on their own streets. I ought to stop at home and be a patriot, like the old girls who want to shoot the miners and *make* 'em do as they're told!"

As she spoke, she crossed to a small building which stood on the roadway and which smelled strongly of fish; and at this moment she heard the train whistle and saw it begin to move. Amused, she forgot for an instant her chief preoccupation, and stood watching the train's slow progress. It came clanking towards her, black and grimy, so threateningly heavy that Lydia was alarmed. She thought one would not have very much chance of living if one fell under those tremendous wheels! How huge they were; and what power the engine must have! Fascinated, Lydia drew back a little, so that she would be safe from the oncoming train. A great wave of hideous smoke was suddenly blown by an unexpected breeze from the sea, and swooped down, enveloping her face and blinding her

eyes. She stepped farther away, turning, and bending her body, so as to protect her eyes from the flying smuts.

As she straightened, she had her back to the train. A car had just pulled up in front of the colonnade upon the other side of the street; a man had stepped from it, and was hurrying across the street towards her. Gerard! He was smiling—signalling. "Hey!" shouted Lydia. "Here I am!" She forgot everything else. Heedlessly, with her mind in joyous tumult, she ran towards him. She saw a look of horror leap to his face. What? He gesticulated wildly with his arms, cried out in a voice that was dry with fear, "Go back! go back!" and ran with lightning swiftness. Dazed, bewildered, Lydia faltered in the roadway, felt the rough thrust of his arm as he swept onward, heard the violent skirring of powerful motor brakes, and was thrown to the ground. Half-stunned, she was conscious of a shriek, a thud, some louder noise, and struggled again to her feet. There, behind her upon the ground, was a limp body—Good God! Gerard! Beside him, still pale-faced, still smoking his cigarette, still wearing that pained smile of contempt for fools, was the young man of the yellow car. The car itself, half-turned in the roadway, stood a yard away. Frantic, Lydia fought her way through those who, while she yet stood incapable of understanding what had happened, had gathered about the body. She was crazed with anguish.

"My God! Gerard! Gerard!" she screamed. "He's hurt!"

The young man with the cigarette raised his shoulders and began to speak to those who were clustering closer and closer about him. But Lydia understood nothing of what he said. She was bending over Gerard, lifting his hand to her breast, smoothing back the hair from that grey face, calling to him in vain. His mouth still wore an expression of agony that it was shocking to see; the fists were clenched; the arms were lifeless. Was this Gerard, who a moment before had been so rich in life; so brimming with joy at seeing her? Could it be

true that he did not any longer know that she was there, and that she would gladly have given her life to save him hurt? She could not think it. He *must* know she was there, loving him as tenderly as ever. He *must* know. Nothing would convince her of the contrary. "Gerard, speak to me. Speak to me, my dearest! Gerard! Gerard!" With increasing frenzy Lydia tore at his shoulders, trying to raise them, to embrace him. There seemed to be a buzzing, a roaring of voices, and somebody whom she did not know came to Lydia's side. He spoke to her, touching Gerard's body and opening the waistcoat, while Lydia, not comprehending what he said, and following only his actions, guessed at the meaning of his glance up at those other faces.

"He's not! He's not!" she sobbed wildly. "I don't believe it: You don't know. You *can't* know!"

But when all those faces into which she so appealingly stared in turn gave back the one answer, as if they were judges remorselessly condemning her to death, she knelt crouching in the roadway beside the corpse; and at last, when they lifted Gerard and bore him away, she suffered herself, fainting, to be led and supported by those who followed. All hope was drained from her. She neither knew nor cared whither they were going. With her eyes fixed upon the ground, she stumbled between her helpers, wearied to death of living.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: THE EBB TIDE

I

It was dark by the time Lydia reached Camden Town, for the evening was stormy, and black clouds hung very low in the sky. She walked slowly along the road, apparently unconcerned with the doings of any of those whom she met. Indeed, at times it seemed that she must be almost without the powers of sight and feeling, for she brushed against passers and proceeded upon her way as if unconscious of the contacts. She was dressed very plainly in black, and the long black coat which she wore accentuated her thinness and the pallor of her cheeks, so that many people stopped and looked back at her after they had gone by, expressing thereby that curiosity which, for the majority of human beings, is the nearest attainable emotion to that of pity.

But Lydia did not pity herself. She hardly had any concern with herself. She was going home, back to the shop, back to Sebastian. If she shrank from what lay before her, the shrinking was not revealed in her manner of walking, which, although slow, was not uncertain. She had the air of one who is dreaming; and only the familiarity of the road enabled her to cross—as she had so often done in previous years—at the junction of the Kentish Town Road with Great College Street.

She was now within a few doors of home; but her rate of progress did not vary. Without looking to the right or the left, she stopped as she came abreast of the shuttered front of the shop, above which the shabby gold lettering said "Dealer in SEBASTIAN ROWE Antiques." Only then, by the faint shudder which ran through her, did she give any sign of her strong aversion. She paused with her hand half-raised to the little white bell that projected from the door in the shutter. Her eyes closed. She might, for this fraction of time, have been debating whether she should enter or depart. At length, how-

ever, she pressed the bell, and heard its melancholy high-pitched echo within the shop.

It was three weeks since Lydia had run away to join Gerard. During the whole of that time she had been either in Dieppe, detained there in connection with the inquest upon her lover, or at Gerard's home, with her mother and father. During all that time she had neither written to Sebastian nor heard from him; and she had crossed the Channel to-day only in response to a telegram which she had received that morning from Mrs. Way, a telegram which had told her nothing, but which urgently and mysteriously demanded her presence. She was here, waiting to be admitted to the shop from which she had escaped as from a prison; but she no longer had any hostility to the shop, because she felt that she no longer had hostility to anything connected with her former life, or any feeling at all save one of incredulous horror at the event which had robbed her of happiness. She still felt, at times, that Gerard must return from the dead, again to hold her close in his arms, again to kiss her until she kindled to laughter and passion.

Her wait in the street, while the familiar sparse promenade of human beings down the Kentish Town Road at this hour continued as of old, served to attune Lydia to the life she had deserted. Each minute, so far from causing her pain, did something to call up memories of habit and practice which soothed and numbed her sensitivenesses. She was not impatient to enter. With a docility that well showed her changed temper, she submitted to the rustle of feet upon the pavements, the dull grumble of tramcars, the thrilling drum of a passing red omnibus. They crept about her, like soft waves, stealthily lulling her to quietude of spirit.

And at last she heard the bell fixed to the inner door of the shop—Ting-ting-trrring—and felt that she was being observed through a small hole in the shutter. The door in the shutter was pulled open, and the shrivelled rusty figure of

Mrs. Way was silhouetted against a pale light which she had switched on at the foot of the stairs.

"Good evening, Mrs. Rowe," cried Mrs. Way, with a kind of frantic brightness which represented genuine relief. "Oh, I'm *so* glad to see you. It's like years since you went away. It is, really, and that poor man—— Well, I give you some idea in my telegram, *din't* I. Oh, Mrs. Rowe, I never liked to say more than I did—you know, I thought I'd break it sort of gently to you that he was ill. That's why I put it 'very urgent and ask you to come at once; 'very urgent' I said, 'and serious but not to alarm.' That's what I said, din't I! 'very urgent and serious. But not to alarm.' But I wouldn't let him go to the hospital. No, I wouldn't. When Doctor Tetley said, 'hospital,' I said to him, 'why Mrs. Rowe'd never forgive me, Doctor, not if I was to let him go. No,' I said, 'I'll telegraph to Mrs. Rowe,' I said; 'but let him go,' I said—— But come inside, my dear; come inside. I expect *you're* tired, with all this travelling, too . . ."

Lydia, stupefied, stepped within the door in the shutter. What! Had Sebastian told this woman nothing? Her heart swelled. It was impossible. Yet why impossible? Wasn't it like him? Mrs. Way spoke in the most natural and friendly manner, without a hint of knowledge. She would never have been able to do this if she had known anything. She would have been reserved, cruel, with all her hidden foulness of mind loose and rampant. She knew nothing. But what was the matter? What had happened?

"He's ill, then," Lydia asked, in a low voice. "What is it? His heart?"

"A stroke, Mrs. Rowe. A stroke. He's paralysed down all his right side—just can't move his leg nor his arm. And can't speak a syllable. I give you my *word*, Mrs. Rowe, it's the saddest thing I ever saw. *The* saddest. But come upstairs, Mrs. Rowe. He's there. He's awake. I've told him you're coming.

He's expecting you. It's been quite wonderful the way he's brightened up at the thought of you coming. Hasn't said anything, you know; but *looked*. Mrs. Rowe, the way that man *looks*. Course, he's missed you. I oughtn't to say it, but he's moped about—no spirit—no nothing—all the time. You'd have thought you'd gone for good, the way he was. *You* know. But *to-day*, well, more than once to-day I've had to go out of the room, so as he shouldn't see me crying. You know, it makes you feel terrible. Now I know you think I'm runnin' on, and all that; but, my dear, I'm only trying to prepare you a bit; or else you may, well, get just a little bit of a shock when you see him, poor dear. You know what I mean, Mrs. Rowe."

"Yes," sighed Lydia, thoughtfully, as though she had been thinking of something quite different. "I know what you mean, Mrs. Way. You're an awfully good sort."

"Oh, well," answered Mrs. Way, quite pleased with the admission. "Try to do my best, you know. There's a nurse, dear. Only she's gone home now, while I just look after him till she gets back."

"A nurse," repeated Lydia. She was following Mrs. Way up the stairs; and as she breathed she inhaled that familiar smell of stale dust which in the past had seemed to drug her and rob her of life. She was very weary. At last they reached the door of the bedroom. Here, for the first time, Lydia faltered. Under her breath, she said, "I can't go in." But in spite of that, when Mrs. Way went into the room, and held the door open, she followed, her lips compressed and her head erect, to hide the emotion which had stirred her heart so deeply a moment earlier.

II

The room was in partial darkness. But Mrs. Way turned on the light, and Lydia saw Sebastian. He was lying on his

back in his little bed, his head showing above the coverlet. His left hand lay, outside the bedclothes, upon his breast. At first she could detect no change in his face—only a queer look to which she could apply no description;—but she could not bear to meet his eyes. She stood within the doorway, very upright, but with her eyes cast down, while Mrs. Way began to fidget about the room.

"Here's somebody come home. Who you want. Now you're happy, aren't you!" she said, cheerfully, to Sebastian. Then, as if he had been a child, and deaf, she continued, in the same tone, but turning to Lydia. "Can't *say* anything, you know. But he's all right—aren't you, Mr. Rowe! I say you're *all right*. Now Mrs. Rowe's come home. It's a treat. He's brighter than he's bin all day. It happened yes'dy, and I could *not* find your address. Hunted everywhere. I ask *him* for it, but he put his hand to his head. Oh, the time I had! However, found it at last, and you know the rest. Yes, the doctor says he must have had rheumatic fever very bad when he was young. But he's hopeful. Isn't he, Mr. Rowe!"

Sebastian stretched out his left hand, and Lydia, advancing, took it in both of hers. At last she met Sebastian's eyes, but for an instant only. They seemed to burn her. But the hand she held began to give little twitches, and she could tell that Sebastian was trying to communicate something to her. His eye rolled in the direction of Mrs. Way.

"Wants me to go," cried Mrs. Way, drawing down her mouth and mysteriously nodding. "That's what *that* is! I'll run down and get you some supper, Mrs. Rowe. You'll be faint after the long journey. Dear me, I'm as glad as *he* is to see you back. It's like old times!"

And with that she ran out of the room, while Sebastian's eyes were turned to Lydia with an expression of ironic amusement at which she wondered. He could smile, then! How strange it was to be here, half-alive, and to see Sebastian amused,

when she had thought she must die because her heart was broken! What was Sebastian saying? He freed his hand, pointed to his mouth, as if drawing attention to his dumbness; and then resumed possession of Lydia's fingers, which he carried to his cheek. She saw tears in his eyes. They welled out upon his lashes, and he looked quickly away, gripping her hand very tightly and struggling to be calm.

Lydia, still holding his hand, drew a chair to the side of the bed, and sat down. She was more clearly aware of the drawn aspect of Sebastian's face. She had thought never to see that face again; she had hoped to be happy. Now she was here again, amid the familiar scenes, frozen, surveying Sebastian with so much emotion under her cold exterior that she seemed to be fainting with sorrow and pity.

"It's me that's done it," she was thinking. "I've been wrong every time. With Ambrose, and with Gerard, and with Sebastian. Every time. But for me, Gerard would still be alive; and Sebastian . . . How am I going to bear it? I'm wicked. I've done wrong. I didn't mean to, but I've done it. And *they've* paid. I don't know why I should be allowed to live when Gerard's dead and Sebastian's . . ." Her head drooped. Her eyes closed.

When she again opened them, in agony, she found that Sebastian was looking closely at her. He was slightly shaking his head. He withdrew his hand again and held it out towards her face; and Lydia, bending over the bed, allowed him without recoiling to pinch her thin cheek a little between his finger and thumb. Again Sebastian shook his head, showing that he was concerned as to her health. Then, as his eyes wandered, he caught sight of her black dress. He pointed from the dress to the hat, and gave a questioning glance.

"Gerard's dead," Lydia answered, speaking for the first time. "Trying to save me. He was killed." She watched Sebastian, and was puzzled to see that his brows moved and he

faintly nodded, with an expression of regret. What! He was sorry! He looked once from her dress to her cheeks, to her eyes, and his gaze became intent. It became cruel. Lydia could not sit still. She rose abruptly from her place beside the bed, and moved about the room, beginning to take off her hat. Everything there was disarranged. Everything was undusted and uncared for. The curtains had not been changed: they were black with grime opposite the part of the window which was open. The mirror in the wardrobe door was misted with dust. Pictures were awry; mats were thrown down carelessly; she could see the curly smears where Mrs. Way had swabbed the oilcloth with a mop, and the outer dulness of dust where the mop had not carried. It was the same everywhere. Dingy, dusty, melancholy, the room dismayed her. Upon a lower plane than her self-punishing consciousness of guilt, this disorder was a punishment the more.

She had left him to this. After those years together, she had forsaken him. And he did not seem to know it. Had he forgotten? Had some merciful oblivion blotted out his memory of her going? Or had he not cared? Yet he had cried at her return; she had seen the tears shimmering in his eyelashes as he held her hand to his cheek. Heartsick, Lydia opened the wardrobe door, for the purpose of putting away her hat and coat. She moved across to the dressing-table, driven thereto by a purely mechanical impulse to brush her hair, and remembered that there would be no brush, since her own had been taken to France. In glancing round for her dressing-case she noticed that there was something white in the waste-basket which stood beside the dressing-table. It looked like an envelope.

Why, what could this be? Lydia had no suspicion. She stooped, and picked the envelope from the basket, turning it over in her fingers as she did this. "For Sebastian." It was her own letter, in which she had told him that she was never to return. It was unopened. He had not seen her message. The

letter must have been knocked into the basket by this swaying curtain. A cry rose to Lydia's throat. The room swayed before her. Turned outwardly to stone, but inwardly all fire, she stared at the envelope which held her secret. She then deliberately tore it across, made to throw the fragments into the basket, and, with sudden memory, turned round towards the bed.

Sebastian was watching her. She saw that he had observed every action of hers. And at the look in his eyes Lydia almost screamed. Such old, weary knowledge shone in them; such dark bitterness of pain and insight; that she shrank back against the dressing-table, appalled. So passed a long minute of terror. Then Sebastian held out his one free hand towards her, and although she struggled to resist his desire Lydia went once more slowly to his side, holding within her clenched fingers the pieces into which she had torn the letter. What did he know? What did he guess? Her bosom was heaving, her heart was beating so loudly that she could hear its rolling thud within her breast. But Sebastian laid his hand upon that hand of Lydia's which imprisoned the torn letter. His clasp tightened. Mumblingly he struggled to speak, with ghastly impotence, making meaningless sounds like the muffled screaming of an animal in terror. Lydia could not meet his eyes. She tried to do so, and could not. She did not know what he saw, or read, or guessed; but she was stricken with fear. Presently, with a long sigh, Sebastian ceased to regard her, relaxed his grip, patted her hand very gently, and let her go. She saw a smile cross his lips—a smile of sympathy, of pity, of not ignoble pride. And with that she fell upon her knees beside his bed, shaken by violent sobbing, while Sebastian's tender hand smoothed her hair and tremblingly strayed to her shoulders.

THE END

FRANK SWINNERTON

At the age of fourteen Frank Swinnerton became a clerk in a publishing house, and a few years later went to the firm of Chatto & Windus as literary adviser. During his childhood he had known little else but poverty and ill health. But those years lived in the drab surroundings of a sprawled-out London suburb gave him invaluable experience of the life about which he writes with such insight and understanding. His first novel was published when he was twenty-four and eight years later the publication of *Nocturne,* written in six weeks under the most trying circumstances, was the literary event of the year. His ability as a raconteur and his delightful sense of humour make him a popular figure in London's literary circles. At present he lives in Surrey where he grows flowers and writes his books. In his spare time he writes literary criticism for the Manchester *Guardian.* Among his best known novels, besides *Nocturne,* are *On the Staircase, The Happy Family, Coquette,* which displays the same fine technique as *Nocturne, A Brood of Ducklings,* and *The Elder Sister.* He has also written a bland but devastating critical study of Stevenson.

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